

Night

This first novel is one of the most disturbing ever published; nothing quite like it has appeared in print before. It tells of the suffering, treachery, and heroism in a Rumanian ghetto where Jews from all over Europe were being concentrated prior to the 'final solution' of the Nazis.

The author has written from the depths of his own experiences; at the age of thirteen, he and his family were transported to a similar ghetto, but out of all the horror emerges a totally unsentimental affirmation of the human spirit of love.

Night

a novel by

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translated by

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from the German

Nacht



W. H. Allen
London

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Translation © Doubleday & Co. Inc.

Printed and bound in Great Britain
by C. Tinling & Co. Ltd.,
Liverpool, London & Prescott
for the publishers
W. H. Allen & Company,
Essex Street, London WC 2.

All the characters in this book
are fictitious,
and any resemblance to actual
persons, living or dead,
is purely coincidental.

For My Mother

*For a small moment I have forsaken thee;
but with great mercies I will gather thee.*

Isaiah 54,7

Part One

I

The man stepped quietly into the room—as quietly as though he were afraid of waking the dead. It was gloomy. Gradually the man's eyes became used to the dim light and the outlines of the sleeping platform that stretched the length of the room became more distinct.

There they lay. Most of them had died of typhus during the past week; a few were still breathing but were too weak to move. At the back, in the farthest corner, close to the unglazed window was one empty place—that was his.

His fingers fidgeted nervously with his jacket, with the patch to which the yellow star of David was affixed; the star had become a little loose and he now pinned it on more firmly.

Why had he come back home? It was sheer madness! No, he could not possibly stay here the night; everything was contaminated; he had to go and look for a place elsewhere.

His gaze wandered over the iron stove on which a kettle full of water and an empty, encrusted food bowl stood . . . and on . . . to the half open door through which he could see the silhouette of the rainy city. He walked back to the door, but when he touched the doorknob he suddenly remembered something, turned around again, and shuffled back.

"Nathan," he said hoarsely, "I have to ask you one last favour."

Nathan made no reply. The man stared pensively at the dead

man's feet; they were wrapped in rags held together by string, like his own feet. The strings are still good, he thought, not as frayed as mine. The rags aren't worth much, but at least they are dry and I can use them as a second set. He did not reflect long. He untied the strings and put them in his pocket, then he unwrapped the rags from the rigid feet whose toes were spread wide like crow's-feet and stuffed them in his pockets, too. He did this without the least feeling of revulsion. Nathan had been his best friend and it was only natural that he should be his heir. Before leaving he picked up the dead man's hat and crammed it on his head, letting his own battered hat drop to the floor.

"Don't be angry, Nathan," he said, "don't be angry that I also took the hat... but mine wasn't waterproof any more." He grinned slightly, did not look at Nathan again, and left.

The street was desolate. Rain and nightfall had probably driven the people off... or was it only fear? It's because they are afraid, the man thought. His lips, which only a moment ago had grinned, closed again and his face suddenly turned hard.

He had a ravaged face, devastated by hunger and want. He pushed the unfamiliar hat, which was too wide for him, deeper onto his forehead; his trousers, which were held up by a piece of wire, he tied more tightly together; he was not wearing a shirt and his sunken chest looked grey and hairy under the torn jacket. How cold it still is, he thought, shuddering. Spring was a long time coming this year. And it was already March... March 1942.

After he left the house, he turned to the left and then simply walked straight ahead. He could just as well have turned to the right; it wouldn't have mattered, since he had no idea where he was going. All he knew was that he would turn in somewhere tonight, had to turn in somewhere tonight, somewhere with four walls and a roof.

Most of the streets in the ghetto of Prokov looked the same. The war had not left much—not much besides the long rows of blackened, blind ruins. Prokov was a Ukrainian town on the banks of the Dniester which had been occupied by Rumanian troops after the Red Army had evacuated it. The ghetto was in-

habited mostly by Rumanian Jews, but there were still a few other Jews, a few survivors of the old Jewish community of Prokov who had always lived here, and also some Jews from the surrounding countryside. The Ukrainians had moved out when the ghetto was established; they didn't have much left to lose in the rubble-strewn area; the authorities had assigned them empty quarters in the northern and southern sections of town which were only partially destroyed; many of them, however, had simply moved on and dispersed in all directions.

The man had been among the first to be deported to the Ukraine. He had been here since October 1941 and had experienced the actual birth of the ghetto. He remembered that at first everything had been much easier than it was today. In the beginning the ghetto had not been overpopulated, as it was now. At that time there had been only the desperate struggle for something to eat; only later on, after more and more transports arrived from Rumania, the struggle for a place to sleep had begun, which was conducted just as bitterly and ferociously and which was just as vital.

He was walking slowly now. He would gladly have walked faster, but he was too tired and too weak and his legs refused to co-operate. The street scene became progressively less distinct. It seemed to him as though the shadowy wings of a great bird of death had gradually lowered to cover the mud and the ruins. The burned-down stumps of walls at the edge of the street laughed silently at the wan sky. Occasionally he would see a corpse lying in the mud and the only thought this sight elicited from him was what tough luck the other fellow must have had. This thought occurred to him without his feeling anything but the gentle triumph that it was not he who lay there, that he was still able to walk, even if he didn't know where to go now.

He glanced up briefly. A horse-drawn cart was coming towards him through the rain. The driver was hidden under the heavy tarp. The horse was pawing its way forward blindly, without direction. It was a half-starved nag whose ribs jutted out of its belly like rungs of a ladder.

He let the cart pass. Then he crossed the street.

2

The woman had been following him for some time, but he did not turn around. Now he heard the tapping of her feet again behind him on the wet pavement.

She doesn't seem very steady on her feet either, he thought indifferently. The woman must have watched him as he crossed the street; she was standing against a house wall, under a roof that hung over into the street, and had said something to him as he was passing by.

He still remembered snatches of what she had said: something to exchange . . . a coat . . . a good coat . . . almost new . . . for a place to sleep . . . just for a place to sleep. He hadn't stopped long.

The woman's frightened face reappeared in his mind's eye. It's always the same story, he thought moodily. The woman had no place to stay and wanted to buy someone else's place in one of the flophouses. She was afraid of the roundups. He knew she would give up everything so as not to have to spend the coming night on the street. You're not stingy when you're afraid. He laughed briefly. He had tried to make it clear to her that he had no place himself, but it was as if she hadn't even heard him, or as if she simply couldn't comprehend what he said.

She stuck to his heels like a burr. After some time he looked back furtively; he could not see her any more, she had fallen behind. She had been swallowed up in the dusk. He was glad to have shaken her off and soon he forgot the incident altogether.

It was becoming difficult to make any headway. At certain spots the mud from the road also covered the cracked kerbs, and whenever his feet accidentally smacked into the mud he was in danger of losing his foot rags. Suddenly he started feeling nauseous and his knees began to buckle and to itch as though they were full of ants.

He stopped at the next intersection, to gather his strength. There was a peculiarly empty feeling inside his head. For the fraction of a second he saw a mirage of fluffy corn meal in front of his eyes, and his mouth began to water; then the vision dissolved again gradually and he stood bent over a puddle, trying to vomit.

After the attack had passed he began to walk again.



He wanted to find shelter before the curfew went into effect. The thought of the night—the bare, unlit streets of the Prokov ghetto and the onset of the police raids—affected him like strong coffee, whipped up his energies, and drove him on. Suddenly it also seemed to him as if someone were calling his name. “Ranek!” the voice called out. “Ranek! Ranek!” It was like an admonition; it came with the whispering of the drizzling rain, it came out of the squishy, gurgling mud of the street. Perhaps that is mother, he thought, or perhaps it isn’t she, damn it. “You always managed until now,” he murmured to himself. “You’ll manage again.” But he could not think of a single place where he might be able to sleep, that would take him in. He had tried several places yesterday, but his search had been in vain.

There was a flophouse in which he had lived some time ago. It had been owned by a Russian and was one of the favourite flophouses in the entire ghetto and went by the name of “sanctuary”. A year ago the people who slept in one huge room still had to pay ten kopecks for this right, but since the owner had been killed by Rumanian guards during a black market transaction everyone now lived there free of charge. Living in the sanctuary had been good, good and warm. But one day the place had been raided. He himself had been lucky and had not been

there at the time of the raid. However, he had been afraid to come near the place since. New people had moved in. He would have liked to go back there now, but he knew it was senseless, his place had been reoccupied long ago.

A sharp wind blew from the direction of the Dniester. It reached under his ragged suit, puffing him up like a balloon. The vague contours of a bridge appeared through the crack in the wall of a burned-out house. The fog was always thicker near the river than on the streets. This was where the eastern part of the city of ruins started; on the other side, behind the fog banks, lay the Bazaar and the long street that went by the name Pushkinskaja, the heart of the town, which beat animatedly during the daytime but invariably died out with the onset of dusk. Near the Bazaar, on higher ground, there stood a factory that had been shut down . . . then came a desolate park whose lawns were chewed up, the park with sawed off-trees and benches without backs.

Two more corpses at the edge of the kerb, but they emitted a peculiar calm; their faces had a grey veneer to them . . . like the face of the street. As he passed by the corpses he had the illusion that they were staring at him. He saw a few motionless bodies in a hallway; since the hallway door had been torn off and lay on the street, he was able to look into the building as far as the stairway; there were corpses lying there, too. He guessed that they had been piled up there provisionally, for the duration of the night. He passed another house, which had only half its roof missing but which otherwise seemed to be intact; it was painted a bright red, a colour that looked rusty-brown in the rain. Behind a window on the first floor he saw the silhouettes of its inhabitants, and this fleeting impression stayed with him longer than usual. Perhaps something was being cooked inside, soup, at this very moment, and the people stood hungrily around the kettle, others were perhaps snoring already, or were lying restlessly on their places, waiting. He thought of the fragrance rising out of the kettle, mingling with the sour smell of human sweat, and he was overcome by something like longing.

The gross roaring of drunken Rumanian soldiers echoed out of a side street, became weaker, subsided altogether. He had

automatically crouched down. Suddenly the scar on the back of his head burned again. He touched the spot, rubbed it, and this made him remember the day when he was beaten with a stick for the first time in his life. He remembered it patchily, for seconds as clearly as during the burst of a flash bulb, which extinguished again just as suddenly . . . how they had got him out of bed at dawn. He saw himself, befuddled with sleep, starting up out of bed, staring at the door from which the bloated figure of a sergeant slowly detached itself and came towards him. Then he also saw the three other strangers in the dim light. His alarm, which he had set the evening before, sounded at the very moment that they dragged him out of the room.

He rummaged round in his jacket pocket and wanted to take out a bit of ersatz tobacco, but somehow he felt a sudden aversion to the black, stinking stuff.

The street had a sharp bend to the right. When he took another look around, he became aware that the area had become gradually noisier the closer he came to the Bazaar. Everywhere groups of men stood about whispering, quickly settling small transactions before the night set in. He encountered a mob of children who either had their hair cropped very short or had no hair at all. They were playing 'catch' in the rain and almost ran him down. Snatches of mouth-organ music came out of the yard of a house. High above a window was opened. He could hear a woman's voice squabbling and the bawling of an infant . . . and then it seemed as if someone was pissing down on the street.

Only now he noticed the long lines of pathetic people on the other side of the street. They had no home. What little luggage they had was with them, and a few loose piles of bedclothing lay on the street. They'll be swept away once the roundups start, he thought . . . swept away like rubbish by the street cleaner's broom; tomorrow morning there would be nothing left to see of them. He felt an intense itch in his intestines. Why should a sight like this still affect you so badly, he thought, and you've seen it a hundred times. One simply can't get used to it.

A crude shadow rose up before him: the demolished statue of

the Lenin monument; it stood in the middle of the street, one of the characteristics of this place. He now began to give serious thought to the idea of hiding in one of these houses before it got too dark. Or should he give his old home a try . . . ? The sanctuary? Perhaps one could arrange something with the people who lived there? Perhaps there was a small spot in the huge room where he could flop down? Or wouldn't they even let him in at the door? No one knew him. Or did they? Kanner and Rosenberg were supposed to have gone back there; old comrades of his. Would they put in a word for him? Stubbornly he examined his plan from all sides, but he could not reach a decision because he was suddenly distracted.

His attention was drawn to a corpse. It had caught his eye because it had not been stripped clean by the people on the street; it was still wearing a pair of trousers and only the upper part of the body and the feet were naked. The corpse lay in the gutter, a few steps away from the ruined monument; his arms spread out, his mouth agape, he gave the impression of wanting to utter one last scream. His walking stick lay nearby. "Ranek," the man told himself, "this is something for you." He took a quick look around, but none of the passers-by seemed to pay him any attention. He knelt down beside the dead man and inspected his trousers. They were torn and filthy with excrement. No wonder they hadn't been taken; people nowadays were not as generous as that. He rummaged through the pockets. Once, and then once again. He was about to give up, disappointed, when he found a half-smoked, crushed Rumanian cigarette.

He got up. He did not rush on. His fingers trembling he lighted the butt. Calm down, he told himself . . . Come on, calm down, man; have a quiet smoke; these few minutes won't make any difference.

Gradually a strange feeling of well-being overcame him—it had been some time since he had smoked his last genuine cigarette. Since that day, on which his private world had collapsed like a house of cards, he had smoked nothing but cheap black stuff, rolled in scraps of newspaper.

The street looked more and more hopeless as the light faded.

3

The woman now came closer, half-hesitating. She was tottering like a drunk. Her face startled him it was so vacant.

Ranek spat angrily on the ground; he was not exactly delighted that she had caught up with him after all, and now he pretended not to have noticed her. His cigarette had got wet in the meantime and threatened to go out; he quickly stuck a scrap of newspaper on it and it began to glow again.

Ranek had no idea whether the woman was still following him and would bother him again or whether this second meeting was also accidental. But when she stopped by the monument and watched him expectantly, he stepped up to her, furious, and grabbed her. "Damn it, I know that trick," he snapped, "you stick to someone's heels until he goes soft, eh?" The woman stared back at him wordlessly.

"Why are you still following me? Why, damn it, why?" He began shaking her; she fell back and forth in his arms like a stuffed doll.

"What do you want from me? I don't have a place to sleep, understand! I told you before."

"You're lying," the woman said haltingly, "I watched you. You look like . . . like someone . . . on his way home. You still have a home. I know."

"I see! You seem to have no doubts about that!" Ranek uttered a furious laugh. "You seem to think that everything is for sale," he then said, controlling himself with great difficulty, "even a human life, no?"

The woman panted and just kept staring at him.

"If I did have a place to sleep," he said, "do you think I'd give it to you for your filthy coat? Do you think I'd go on the street for your sake and get caught so that you can warm your arse in my bed?"

"... the coat ... you could trade it for some food," she said tonelessly.

"I'm not interested," he said.

"But you could trade it! You could trade it!" Stuttering, she kept repeating the same sentence over and over.

Ranek loosened his grip. He wanted to make it clear to her and tell her once more that he himself had no idea where he would spend the night, but he didn't, because he felt it was no use. She seemed to be possessed by her idea. Probably she had tried to attach herself to others before and the hopelessness seemed to have confused her. He knew what that was like. He was nearing the end of his patience and was about to push her away from him and leave when he felt through her thin coat that she was round and soft, not emaciated like all other ghetto women.

"You haven't been here long, have you?" he asked, taken aback.

"Since this morning," she said hesitantly.

He smiled. "Are you from the Chernovtsy transport?"

"Yes."

"Where are your bags?" he continued.

"No bags," she said, "no time to pack." Her voice sounded hoarse as if she had been drinking schnapps.

"Tired?" he said, grinning.

She nodded.

"Nothing to eat, eh?"

"Not only from that," she said, "but if you do nothing all day but look for a place to stay..." Then she asked suddenly, "Where are all those people running to?" and she nodded in the direction where a crowd of people and their bags were moving down the street.

"Probably to the edge of the river," Ranek said indifferently.

"They have to hide somewhere. Tonight they'll probably be rounded up and taken to the Bug . . . to be shot. Too many homeless persons here."

The woman again regarded him with her dead eyes. "Bug . . ." she whispered.

"Like the Dniester here, a river farther east."

"Why don't they shoot the people here?" she asked. "Why do they have to take them all the way to the Bug?"

"How am I supposed to know that?" he said. "You ask stupid questions."

He now let go of her and pushed his hat casually back onto his neck. After he had taken a few steps, he turned around once more and said: "The roundups will start pretty soon. Make sure you get a roof over your head. I'll do the same, but don't count on me."

"I'm no longer counting on anyone," she said.

"You're counting on your money, eh?"

"Money?" she whispered.

"Then on your coat," he said, grimacing, "it's a damn good coat." The woman nodded.

"A coat means bread and corn," he said ironically.

The woman smiled crookedly.

"Somewhere there still are a few fools who'd even sell their skin for this price," he said. "The only thing is you don't have enough time to find yourself a fool."

"Because of the night?" she whispered.

He grinned fatuously. But suddenly he saw the woman's hand grab at the empty air. He stepped up to her quickly and held her. "Don't be stupid!" he said coarsely, and pointed to the muddy road. "If everyone just flopped down there, where would we be then? Why don't you pull yourself together!"

Her face had changed. It was completely distorted with fear and, in the semi-darkness of the street, it looked grotesque. The woman had clawed with her fingernails into his tattered jacket; her body quivered as if she were being whipped.

He cursed with astonishment. Because he suspected that she was having a nervous breakdown he did not let go of her and

clasped her hands as if with a steel ring. There they stood, locked together. The effort was too much for him; his blood drained from his head for several seconds; he was dazed. The street slowly began to seesaw. The Lenin monument, the walking stick, the rigid face in the gutter and the woman's horrified grimace close to his own face began to merge, melt into each other, became a multicoloured caricature, with the grey background of mud and rain.

The spell passed quickly and he could see clearly again. During her quivering attack his hands had unintentionally slipped under her coat; he had left them there. She was so close to him he could smell her perspiration; that was something quite different from the smell of the flophouses, the latrine, and decaying flesh. Although he felt no lust, he groped slowly with his hand under the woman's brassière. For a while he held her soft, full breast.

The woman freed herself now. "Give me a cigarette," was all she said, her voice still as expressionless and hoarse as before.

Ranek took out some of the black stuff and shook it into a scrap of newspaper, spat on it, and rolled the cigarette. "Take this," he said.

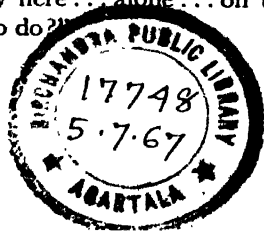
This part of the street had also become desolate in the meantime and looked wet and abysmal. Somewhere in a back yard a pair of cats were romping about and it sounded like the crying of little children. He gave her a light now and inspected her attentively for the first time. Despite the bad light it did not escape him how well dressed she was.

"It's obvious that you're new here," he said with a grin; "what an idea to come into the ghetto wearing silk stockings. You won't be able to wear them for long."

The woman made no reply; she was smoking nervously, taking deep, hasty drags. Ranek's brows had contracted; he wanted to give the sanctuary one more try; somehow he had reached a decision . . . as always, at the last moment.

"I'm going now," Ranek said firmly.

The woman took a few tottering steps towards him. "But I can't stay here . . . alone . . . on the street . . . the raids. What am I going to do?"



"Nowadays everybody has to think of himself first," he said icily. "That's the law of our time."

Ranek walked on.

A little later he could again hear the irregular tapping of her heels. Fear is all it is, he thought, the woman is following automatically; perhaps she doesn't even know it herself. He would have liked to chase her away with threats because she would only be in his way, but he didn't. He simply walked more rapidly.

4

By the time he reached the sanctuary it was night. No one could be seen anywhere. He now recognized the gently rising slope on the other side of the ditch, the embankment with barbed wire on top of it. The barbed wire was rusty and had been cut in a number of places. It had been strung up during the days of the siege and now it served no purpose except to tear the trousers of people who wanted to climb across. Behind the embankment stretched the area that was part of the destroyed railway station. The people called it the "old" railway station—a new one had been built since the conquest in the vicinity of the park. Ranek knew that two abandoned railtrucks stood on the torn-up rails with people living inside, but because he had made up his mind he did not think of seeking shelter there now. Railtrucks were not to his liking. No, he thought, damn it, the likes of us have had their fill of railtrucks. He coughed and spat again. Slowly he groped his way forward. A bent telephone pole jutted out of the dark. The silhouette of a fence appeared in front of him; the fence was in bad repair and had several gaps in it. Ranek stepped through one of these gaps and was now in a yard from which he could see the outlines of a lonely ruin. "The sanctuary," he whispered, "... finally."

The sanctuary was the only house along the entire street, a

part of which had survived the siege, as if by a miracle. The wing of the house had collapsed, but the hallway and the main room upstairs had remained intact. It seemed as if the bombs last year had only made a joke and tickled the house on one side. The rest of the street had burned down; all that remained were heaps of rubble and ashes, all along the street, all the way to the Bazaar. The street had no name. Perhaps it used to bear Lenin's or Gorki's name. Or perhaps it was called Railway Street?

Behind the sanctuary there was a stretch of flat land overgrown with bushes, weeds, and thickets, stretching westward, coming to an abrupt end of the river. It was a favourite hideout of many of the homeless.

Ranek walked carefully across the dark yard. Because he remembered everything so clearly he had little difficulty in finding his way over the debris and rubble to the hallway where the stairs were, the stairs that looked as if they were suspended in the air. The floor of the hall was wet and slippery, for the rain fell at an angle through the open entrance and also dripped in through cracks in the walls.

Right in front of the entrance he stumbled over something soft.

Ranek bent down and lighted a match. The brief glow illuminated a man's horrified face.

"You don't have to be afraid," Ranek said. "I'm not police."

"Who are you?" groaned the man.

Ranek felt a hand clasp his feet. Then a sigh of relief. "You're not wearing shoes . . . just rags."

Ranek laughed softly.

"The beaters wear shoes," the man whispered.

"So do you," said Ranek mockingly.

"But mine are civilian shoes. You can recognize that." The man coughed; it sounded hollow. He was unknown to Ranek, evidently one of the newcomers.

"By the way, why are you sleeping in the hallway?" asked Ranek.

"Used to live up there," the man said with his weak, thin voice, and pointed to the dark above the stairs. "The people put me out this afternoon . . . Afraid of becoming infected. I con-

ceased the fever until today, but finally they caught on."

"What's the matter with you?"

"Typhus."

"Why didn't you go to the epidemic hospital?"

"No one has come back alive from the hospital," the man said haltingly.

Ranek nodded. He looked back into the dark yard.

"There's no front door," said Ranek, "and with a flashlight you can be seen from the street. Watch out they don't take you along."

"I can't walk," said the man.

"They've a patented way of getting you to move."

"Yes, they know how," said the man.

"Cigarette?"

"Thanks," the man said slowly. "I'll cup my hand over the cigarette. That way they won't see me from the street."

Ranek would not have stayed with him a moment longer if he had not been calculating in cold blood. In situations like these his brain always worked calmly and systematically. He seemed to be following a benign star today. First there had been the cigarette . . . and now the invalid. The invalid was a gift from heaven and suddenly changed the entire situation. Now he did not have to take a blind chance; now he knew what to do.

"I don't have much tobacco myself," Ranek said. "You've got to save what you can nowadays . . . but I can offer you a butt." Ranek felt sticky spittle on his fingers while he placed the butt between the man's lips. When he lighted the butt he saw again how afraid the man was.

"How long have you had the fever?"

"About twelve days."

"Then you must be close to your crisis today?"

"I think so."

He'll croak tonight, Ranek thought.

"Perhaps I'll survive the crisis," the man said anxiously.

Ranek did not feel sorry for the invalid; he was an everyday case. Still, he wanted to be helpful in some way, at least so that he would not be taken away in a raid. This was not a sentimental

trick, either. Ranek only wanted to repay the man in some form for the profit he was about to derive from his situation. That was only fair. He rarely did something unfair; only when he had no choice.

"I'll hide you somewhere," he said, grabbing the man under the shoulders.

"Put me under the stairway," the man begged.

Ranek tried lifting the man on his shoulders, but he was too weak, dropped him again, and then dragged him jerkily across the grimy floor. The hollow under the stairway was not as spacious as he had thought at first: the back wall was crumbling and there was a pile of rubble. When he had finally fitted the man inside and checked his work once more, he discovered that the man was doubled over and his behind stuck out; he turned him around, but it didn't help much. Then he had an idea, which he executed at once. He went outside to the fence, picked up an armful of broken-off fence boards, brought them inside, and piled them on top of each other in front of the opening. That way someone looking in from the outside would think that it was a pile of firewood.

"You're very decent," the man said. "In these lousy times it's rare to find a person who's remained decent."

"Don't mention it," Ranek said, grinning, "glad to do it."

"Where are you going?" the man asked, suddenly suspicious.

Ranek turned around once more. "I just want to take a look if your place is still free." He was already standing on the stairway.

"What do you mean?" the man said hoarsely.

"If I don't occupy it," Ranek replied indifferently, "then somebody else will... You understand..." He shrugged his shoulders.

* * *

Ranek surveyed the flophouse with one glance: the men playing cards by the window in the faint, flickering light of the kerosene lamp... the crate that was their table... and then... the other part of the large room, outside the circle of light, in the semi-

darkness, the outline of the platform and the bare walls. A babble of voices and coarse laughter was audible. No one seemed to bother about him, yet when he wanted to step farther into the room someone suddenly blocked his way. The man must have stood to the right of the door, since Ranek had not noticed him at first.

"We don't let in anybody from the street . . . we're overcrowded already. Get out at once."

The man tried to push him back to the door. They wrestled with each other for a few moments. Then something crashed to the floor. They let go of each other. The men at the card table looked up . . . strangers all of them. Ranek leaned with his back against the door. The other man kept his distance but regarded him closely; Ranek did not know this man, either, yet he realized at once that he must be their speaker, or, in any case, someone who had something to say here.

"I'd like to stay the night," Ranek said. "I'll go look for another place tomorrow."

It did not look as if the men in the light circle were about to get up and lay hands on him. They were sitting lazily on their travelling bags around the crate and merely stared at him.

But now one of them said: "Throw him out, Sigi!"

"Did you hear that," the fellow who had been addressed as Sigi laughed derisively. "He only wants to stay the night."

He said to Ranek: "We know that, once you're in, we never get rid of you slobs again."

"Throw him out!" the man at the window repeated.

"Let's go," Sigi said. "We're cramped enough in here as it is without you." The meaning of that sentence was unmistakable.

"Kick the Jew in the arse, Sigi!" The men laughed and went back to their game. One of them said, "Moishe, it's your deal."

Ranek stood rooted to the spot. But nothing happened. In the meantime his eyes had become used to the tobacco smoke and the poor light in the room and he was able to distinguish vaguely among the chaotic mass of half-naked figures. Although the platform ran the whole length of the room, there was not enough room on it for everyone, and people also lay on the floor, one next

to the other. They had not fallen asleep yet and had only moved to their respective spots because there was no other place to sit. But the lamp gave off a kind glow, a warmth that trickled through his whole body. No, he didn't want to go back on the street. His clothes stuck like flour paste to his body, a small rivulet trickled from the brim of his hat over his face and dripped on the floor. Before him, in the whitish cloud of smoke, he saw Sigi's face. It was a death's head, shaved, emaciated.

Sigi seemed to be waiting for him to leave of his own accord, since he was doing nothing to expedite his departure. Ranek wanted to explain that he had lived here once before, but Sigi wouldn't believe him, and he hadn't seen Kanner or Rosenberg in the overcrowded room and they would be the only ones who could vouch for him; he began to doubt whether the two had really come back here; it had probably been just a rumour like all other rumours. Therefore he said now, begging, "Perhaps there's some room left under the platform . . . It doesn't matter to me . . . I . . ."

"Others would give their eye teeth to be able to lie down there," Sigi said. "We had people coming all day asking, and we had to turn them away." He made a circular movement with his hand. "You can see yourself—there isn't room for another body."

When he noticed that Ranek made no move to leave, he became excited and began flailing his arms about, starting to push Ranek out of the way. But Sigi's strength was no greater than his. Sigi's pale face suddenly gave Ranek courage.

"You'll hardly do it by force," Ranek said derisively. Now he played his last trump. "I know for a fact that there is room for one more. There's someone lying in the hallway downstairs." And he tried to make his voice sound firm and repeated almost in a shout: "Someone's lying in the hallway downstairs!"

Sigi felt cornered and looked around as if asking for support. The crowd had begun to stir and Ranek was afraid they would now try to interfere. He was still standing with his back to the door and thus had at least one side covered.

Then somebody said, "Hi there, Ranek!"

It was Rosenberg. Rosenberg smiled broadly and pounded him on the back. "Thought you'd croaked long ago."

"I'm in no rush," Ranek replied with a weak smile.

"Glad to see you back. Would have said hello before, but I was busy."

"First I thought you weren't here any more."

"We were playing twenty-one—*nashe-washe, mein-dein*—you know it don't you?"

"Yes, I know the game." Ranek didn't recollect having seen Rosenberg among the men playing cards by the window.

"With buttons," Rosenberg explained, "in the dark, on my place . . . I'll show you one of these days . . . my own invention." Then he turned to the little skinny fellow: "That's Ranek." Sigi's face remained expressionless. Rosenberg winked at Ranek. "The old place has changed a bit, hasn't it?"

Ranek nodded. Then he asked, "Where's Kanner?"

"Dead." Rosenberg pointed at Sigi. "He's sleeping on Kanner's place now." Sigi grinned.

Somewhere on the platform a woman broke into mad laughter. One of the men at the window slapped down the cards and shouted furiously, "Shut up."

Rosenberg negotiated with Sigi and Ranek discreetly stepped out of earshot. Still looks in pretty good shape, Ranek concluded; next to Sigi Rosenberg looks like a bull. Perhaps he has something going for him on the black market? Seems to be doing swell, it's obvious at once. Rosenberg was perhaps twenty-six years old, had lost practically all his hair, had tiny freckles on his bare skull, but his eyes looked untroubled.

Now Rosenberg turned around. "It's all set," he said. "You'll sleep in Levy's place."

"So the man outside is Levy."

Rosenberg said to Sigi: "Levy isn't coming back anyway."

"Do you have any contagious diseases?" Sigi asked; his voice was beginning to sound much friendlier now.

"Nonsense," Rosenberg said. Sigi was about to raise further objections, but Rosenberg shrugged him off and drew Ranek away with him. They talked for a while and Rosenberg asked Ranek

several questions. Then he explained to him that he wanted to go on playing twenty-one, and led Ranek to his place. Before turning away he talked to someone under the platform at whose side Ranek was going to sleep. Ranek could hear his case explained once more.

His new place was in the corner, close to the door. Again in the corner, he thought sarcastically. As he prepared to lie down he saw the face of an old woman.

* * *

"The floor is wet," Ranek said to the old woman. "Does it rain in here the way it does in the hallway?"

"No, it doesn't rain in," the old woman said. "The people bring the wet in with their filthy feet. You should have brought some sawdust along. I always throw a handful under my arse when the weather is bad." The old woman looked at him out of dim, watery eyes. Abruptly she said, "That's my son lying in the hallway. You probably saw him. This gang here wanted to get rid of him because he has a fever. He caught a fever, there's nothing one can do about that, is there?"

Ranek nodded. The old woman smelled and he had no desire to prolong the conversation.

"I was with him the whole afternoon," the old woman continued, "but now it's too dark for me outside . . . and he said to me, 'Go inside, Mamma, go inside.' "

Ranek placed his jacket on the floor, fitted his hat against the wall as a pillow, stretched out along the floor, and used the remaining part of the jacket to cover part of himself. For a short while he lay there quietly, then he stood up once more and got dressed again.

"He's my youngest," the old woman started again. "They killed my oldest one with an axe."

Yawning, Ranek buttoned up his jacket—he still had two buttons left on top—and stuffed the bottom part into his trousers.

"That was near the Djurin woods," the old woman said. "He

was doing forced labour; they killed him because he wasn't working fast enough."

"He should have worked faster, that's all," Ranek said, grinning.

She said, "He was always a dreamer. The youngest is the exact opposite . . . he's practical. He told me he would come back at night when the others are asleep."

"He can't walk any more," Ranek said coldly. "Besides, I'm here now."

The old woman began to sob quietly.

"The chances of spreading the infection are too great," Ranek said. "He can't come back inside, you have to understand that."

She mumbled something to herself. Then she suddenly asked in a clear voice, "Do you think the police will come tonight?"

"Not very likely," Ranek said in an uncertain tone of voice. "They have their work cut out with all the people in the street. They're not going to come into the houses until they're finished with them outside."

"And my son?"

"But he isn't lying in the street."

"The hallway is open. That's just like lying in the street."

"I hid your son." He explained to her what he had done. "Don't worry about him." He had no idea whether she was grateful to him or detested him. The old woman's face told him nothing.

"You won't be here for long," she scoffed, "because he'll come back . . . if not tonight, then another night. He'll recuperate. The draught and the damp won't hurt him either; he's tough." Now she turned completely toward him. "He's only twenty-five, but looking at him you'd think he was never young in his life."

Ranek said, "Excuse me, I've to go out."

"The latrine is in the courtyard," she said.

"I know."

She gave him an astonished look. He smiled.

"I thought you were new here," she said.

He was still smiling.

"The filthy pigs shit on the board again," she said. "Watch

out that you don't slip." Then she added, "Last week a man slipped, fell in and drowned."

* * *

Ranek did not stay long on the smeary board. As he passed Levy on his way back, he suddenly felt as if he would choke and he couldn't help but stop to say a few words to him. Then he heard someone scream . . . somewhere in the night.

"That's nothing unusual," Ranek said. "Someone's become hysterical." He piled more wood on Levy's body and when he noticed that the sick man was still not satisfied he proceeded to cover his head, the face and mouth contorted with fear.

Levy stared rigidly through the gaps between the boards, stared at the stranger whose name he did not know and who was bent over him now, covering him up.

"You're well hidden now," the stranger said coldly. "We're quits. No one will be able to see you from the street . . . not unless they come into the hallway and shine a light between the boards."

Levy heard the man shuffle off and now he made a great effort to sit up a little. Finally he succeeded. A few steps away, against the wall, there stood a second stranger . . . just a shadow . . . with a white shimmer . . . probably a scarf around the neck. Levy remembered that the shadow had been standing there a long time. When the man had come downstairs he had passed the figure without paying it any attention, and Levy was surprised when the stranger stepped up to it now.

He watched and now heard them talk together. A woman—it struck him. They stepped up to each other.

Once he heard the man say, "I won't sell my place. You'll never be able to get it for your coat."

Then somewhat later, "...but you can share it with me."

The woman murmured something.

The brusque voice of the man : "I've told you my offer ; it's up to you to accept or not to accept. I wouldn't make such a fuss if I were you."

The voice of the woman : "I'm married." Then hesitantly : "My husband hasn't been seen or heard of since November forty-one."

The conversation became more subdued now; occasionally the man would laugh coarsely, and the woman clucked like a chicken.

When they were mounting the stairs, the man said, "Most of the women in the ghetto are completely run down." After a brief pause : "...but you still smell fresh; that's really the only reason I decided to do it."

The rain trickled down evenly and it seemed to the dying man as though all this were as monotonous as timeless eternity.

He coughed and the fever shook him. Nonetheless, he did not change his position; he stayed propped on his elbows and gazed after the two people. His bitterness had increased since the woman had appeared. The two of them would squeeze into the corner by the door; perhaps the woman would stay with the man, perhaps not, perhaps she would leave again when the man was fed up with her or because he wanted to lie more comfortably and therefore preferred to sleep alone. Several weeks or more would pass and one day the man would get himself another woman. Everything would take place in the corner; there the man would screw and eat, play cards, and doze away his time. His everyday existence would trickle away as though his life had always been like that, he would not think back on the past and would pretend that nothing had happened.

Levy's eyes filled with tears. Three months ago when he had moved into the room they were just carrying somebody out. He hadn't known the other man and had not bothered to find out who it had been. But the man died and it was the right of the living to inherit what the dead left behind.

Levy was oozing slime; but he could not wipe himself because he had no room to move. The realization that as far as the people in the room were concerned he was dead was so immense that he suddenly doubted it. "It's impossible," he murmured. "They can't simply have given my place away, that can't be."

He lay back down again, breathing heavily. Then another

thought occurred to him, he became panic-stricken, and urinated.

Upstairs the two were standing quietly, waiting. They waited a long time. Only when the light went out . . . again the scratching noise of steps. The door had no knob, and Levy heard how the man gently pushed it open and shut it again.

Then everything was quiet.

5

Ranek had hoped no one would notice the incident, but the figure that slipped down off the platform now stopped hesitantly, then moved forward again, came directly toward them. Even though it was pitch dark, Ranek guessed from the way the man sneaked up on him that it was Sigi. This could become unpleasant; Ranek took Sigi to the side and brought all his powers of persuasion into play to arrange the matter of the woman. Finally Sigi climbed back on the platform.

Ranek stepped in front of the woman. It seemed to him suddenly as if the two of them were all alone in the dark room.

"What did you tell him?" she whispered.

"I promised him some corn flour."

"Do you have any?" she asked eagerly.

"No," he laughed.

Her warm breath grazed his face; she stood so close to him he could feel her breasts heaving. He was glad it was dark. How long it had been since he had had a woman. . . . It's been months, he thought, and since he wanted to savour the moment he did not pull her under the platform at once.

The woman seemed very calm; this surprised him.

"It has been a long time," he said.

"What are the people going to think of me?"

"There's no light," he said, "... besides, they are used to it; they don't even look any more."

He unbuttoned her coat and then slowly lifted her dress. The woman's nakedness felt cold; it still seemed under the spell of the street and the rain. He began to undress her silently. The woman seemed completely insensitive. Perhaps she was always like that; perhaps only since the long ride on the freight car. He didn't know; it didn't interest him either. He could feel no resistance.

The stove started to wobble suspiciously; the pieces of clothing that had been flung indiscriminately across the lower part of the stovepipe fell to the floor. He did not let go of the unfamiliar body that leaned far back to receive him.

* * *

A little later, after she had freed herself from his embrace, she said to him indifferently: "If I had known you were impotent I would have accepted your offer at once. After all, there was no need to conceal that fact from me."

He said nothing. He picked the coat up off the floor and handed it to her. Then he stepped away from the stove and showed her their place. He watched her spread out the coat in the dark, preparing the bed exactly as he would have done it himself.

"There was no need to conceal it from me," she repeated; her face... a black spot... was turned toward him. He would have liked to see whether it was full of derision or whether she only smiled. But then it occurred to him that it could be a mask, too.

He lay down beside her. More than anything else he would have liked to beat her, but then he saw that she was not making fun of him at all, and was silent. His rage gradually subsided. He looked for her knickers, but only found his hat, and he remembered that the knickers were still lying by the stove.

"Get dressed," he said. "Otherwise you'll catch cold."

She got up to fetch her things and returned shortly.

"All I found was my dress... and this." She held out her stockings and her brassiere and a small corset. "I don't know where the rest of my things are."

"Did you look under the stove?"

She said haltingly, "There's someone sleeping under the stove. I heard him breath."

He knew she was afraid and would not crawl under the stove now. "We'll look for your things tomorrow morning," he said.

Someone in the room was conducting a monologue. Some people were wheezing.

The woman carefully reached for his hand; it embarrassed him that she was caressing his hand.

"What's your name?" he asked.

"Sarah," she whispered.

He told her his name. So, that had been settled; he had to call her by some name or other and before he hadn't had time to ask.

Above somebody was knocking against the platform boards.

"That's Rosenberg," said Ranek. "He wants to let us know that he is still awake."

The signal sounded once more.

"I'm cold," she said. She started to dress.

* * *

"Half our train was sent on farther east," she said. "Did you know that?"

"Yes. Something like that gets around."

"We others were glad that we could stay here."

"Most of them want to stay in Prokov," he said. "The Prokov ghetto is a good ghetto."

"We were told that the Jews are comparatively well off in Prokov."

He nodded. "Better than in other places," he added quietly. "Particularly than with the Germans. We can consider ourselves lucky that this part of the Ukraine was not occupied by Germans but by Rumanians. The Rumanian authorities are not as strict. Not quite as strict."

"They also told us that the food blockade is not as bad here," she said. "Is that true?"

"It was bad," said Ranek. "Especially during the winter. Now it's better."

"Why are there so many corpses on the streets?"

"Most of them are typhus victims."

"But some also died of hunger?"

"Yes, some also died of hunger."

"How does that happen?"

"You're asking stupid questions again," he said roughly. "We weren't allowed to bring money or valuables when we were sent here. You know that yourself! Most people who've been here for some time bartered their last possessions to the Ukrainian peasants for bread. They bartered what they could barter. The last shirt, the last pair of shoes."

"Yes," she whispered.

"No one can trade his naked body for bread," said Ranek.

"No one can do that?" she asked, startled. "But one can work and earn something. Can't you find a place to work here?"

"A place to work? Yes, they exist," he said coldly. "Forced labour. Do you know what that is . . . ? But you don't get paid for that and you get hardly anything to eat for it, either." He pressed her trembling shoulders against the hard wall. "But don't get excited," he said, trying to calm her. "Only those who let themselves get caught have to do forced labour." He stared pensively for a few moments. Then he told her how he had looked for decent work for months on end without finding any and had finally given up.

"But you have to earn something," she whispered. "You've got to eat. You've got to live."

"Yes, indeed one should," he said scornfully. "That's our duty, isn't it? That's the foremost duty each of us has."

"But who buys the food that comes into the ghetto?"

"People who've something left in their pockets. It's obvious: they still exist. Some people were clever enough to smuggle jewellery into the ghetto. Then there are others whom people send money from Rumania."

"How is that possible?"

"Not officially."

"I understand."

"You've got to have contact with a courier . . . a Rumanian

official, officer, or something like that : persons who can cross the border freely and who can move about freely when they are across the border. But you also need someone who can get the money in Rumania."

"So the ghetto isn't sealed off hermetically?"

"It's hermetically sealed only for the likes of us," Ranek said hatefully, "but for people with the right connections it's altogether different."

"And if you don't have any connections," she whispered, "and no extra clothes . . . and no jewels . . . and no money in reserve . . . and still you want to live?"

"You have to know how to help yourself."

"And if you don't?" she asked anxiously.

"If you don't, you just have to make shady deals," Ranek said grimly. "The crooks and the black market operators always have money, as do the police. Then there's one other class that does well here."

"Who are they?"

"The blackmailers, the slave dealers, and the prostitutes."

She nodded silently. She tried to digest what he had said. Then she asked suddenly, "And you, Ranek? What do you do for a living?"

He explained it to her; he told her everything he had learned in the long, difficult months—what tricks you had to know and how you went about staying halfway alive.

The time had passed and the conversation had begun to lapse, until it ceased altogether and the two people lay silently beside each other.

He had fallen asleep then.

* * *

Now he was awake again. It must be midnight by now.

The roundups had started. Familiar noises to which his ears were attuned came from outside. He could differentiate perfectly among them. The sounds seemed to come from a great distance and he couldn't decide whether the howling came from the direc-

tion of the river or the direction of the Pushkinskaja. Ranek thought briefly of the people who were trudging through the dark night, of the laughter of the beaters and the screeching of the women, of the children with their frightened eyes, and of all the others who could not make it through the mud and who fell by the wayside. As long as it was not himself, it was all the same to him. He was hungry. He felt nothing else. A schnitzel wouldn't have been bad now. Or a salami. Damn it, if only he could get hold of a little corn.

The old woman at his left was snoring. Ranek shook her, whereupon she stopped for a short time. Her son is lying out there, he thought, and she is able to sleep. Isn't that odd? However, occasionally the old woman sat up abruptly in her sleep and murmured a series of disconnected words, her arms jabbed out and hit his head and she shoved her pointed knees into his back.

Suddenly the voice to his right said, "Are you awake, Ranek?"

"Yes."

"What time is it?"

"I've no watch."

He felt her arm on his . . . her hand.

"Her hands were just as warm," he said, lost in thought. The woman gave him an astonished look. Ranek nervously wiped his forehead. There they were again, his memories.

"I'm talking rubbish," he said. His voice sounded shaky. "I'm going to have a bit of the black stuff."

Because he could not orient himself in the dark, he climbed out from under the platform and groped his way to the lamp. He walked carefully, always stepping in the foot-wide gaps between the sleepers. Finally he walked against the window frame, a window without panes . . . as in his previous refuge . . . but it was a better window: it was covered with cardboard and the cardboard was like a pane, it fitted snugly into the frame. His fingers slid over the cardboard down to where the sill had to be, and suddenly touched the glass cover of the lamp. He shook the container. There was still a little kerosene left in it. That's good, he thought; that's very good.

Just as he was about to go back he stepped on someone. Onto someone's stomach he thought, but the body made no sound. A vague feeling told him that he had probably stepped on a corpse. He gave the motionless body a kick. Like a dog, he thought . . . dead like a dog on the floor. He felt an uncontrollable urge to smoke.

"Here," said the woman. "I found your tobacco in the meantime."

He placed the lamp down at her feet, groped for his matches, and then lit the lamp. For a time his eyes gazed fascinated on the twitching flame. Light always exerted a peculiar attraction on him. Perhaps because he had been so long in the dark.

He looked up again. The woman was about to roll his cigarette for him and was spilling half the tobacco on the floor. He quickly took it away from her.

"You'll learn. It's a question of practice."

He lighted the cigarette above the hot glass cover, inhaled deeply, blew the smoke absent-mindedly against her naked round thighs, and thought of the corpse.

"Why don't you turn down the wick?" she said tonelessly, but she did not pull down her dress.

"Don't worry," he said. "I'll take the lamp away shortly." And he thought, no need for her to know anything about the corpse.

Close by he saw Rosenberg's legs dangling down from the platform. Should he wake up Rosenberg? Actually he wanted to forget all about the dead person; after all, he didn't want to worry about every little detail . . . especially being a stranger . . . but somehow he could not help himself.

Ranek went with the lamp to Rosenberg, who was still awake. Ranek whispered the news to him.

"Why so secretive?"

Ranek pointed to the woman. "I don't want her to worry."

Rosenberg grunted and slid down from the platform. While they made their way to the window, Ranek cast a quick sidelong glance at the many legs on the platform. As limp as string he thought. Among these legs he discovered a head with strikingly long hair. He pointed the long hair out to Rosenberg.

"That's the long-haired one," Rosenberg said. "She lies wrong way round. Some like that better than always havin' someone breathe in their face."

Ranek nodded. "Do you know the woman?"

"Yes. I'll introduce you tomorrow, if you want. Come, hold the lamp straight, the shade!"

"And?"

"She doesn't whore around."

"Chastity? That no longer exists."

Rosenberg grimaced. "Let me finish. I mean she won't whore around with you."

"Because I can't pay?"

"Not only that . . . she'll even do it for nothing."

Ranek hesitated. Then he shrugged his shoulders. So Rosenberg knew that he was impotent. . . .

He was tottering again and briefly held onto Rosenberg. When they finally stood in front of the corpse, Rosenberg snapped his fingers. "He's not worth carting outside . . . too much work," he said.

Ranek dangled the lamp right above the corpse. A small, skinny man with thin blond hair.

"He wasn't even sick," said Rosenberg. "He starved to death. Has a brother who lives here. The guy is pretty well off, better than most of us anyway. Could have helped him, but you know how things are."

"Everyone thinks of himself first," said Ranek.

"His rags are worthless," said Rosenberg, "there's no need to take them."

"You're right. There's nothing we can do with them."

"We'll lower him through the window," Rosenberg said with expert assurance. Ranek agreed. It was the simplest and most comfortable way to get rid of him.

"Open up, Ranek!"

Everything happened very quickly. The squeaking window latch . . . night wind . . . fresh, pleasantly cool . . . the man's small body . . . propelled forward . . . into emptiness; then below, a smack.

"Levy has company now," Rosenberg said.

"Levy's still alive." Ranek looked at Rosenberg out of the corner of his eyes. Rosenberg cursed because the light had been extinguished too soon by the draught; they closed the window together.

Ranek went back and tried not to think of the little man, of his blond beard, of Levy, and of the woman's head between the many feet, who, Rosenberg claimed, didn't do it with everyone. As he lay down again, he was surprised when Sarah reached for his hand.

"But her hands were warm too," she said softly.

One could not see the window from where they lay, because the front beams of the platform blocked the view and you had to go as far as the door if you wanted to see it; suddenly he knew that she had left her place and had watched everything.

"Was she beautiful?" she asked.

Why does she have to talk about things that don't mean anything to her? he thought. To forget what she saw at the window and the heavy smack as the body plopped into the mud? And the night and the danger and the endless hours?

"I don't know whether she was beautiful," he said. "You never know that."

"What was she like?"

"Tranquil," he said.

"Tranquil?" she asked.

"As tranquil as a lake," he said. "She was surrounded by peace."

"Your beloved?"

He laughed hoarsely. "My mother," he said.

Silence. He felt himself becoming profoundly ashamed because he had compared the hands of a whore with the hands of his mother.

After a while she said: "Doesn't it disturb people when you talk at night?"

"It happens all the time that someone can't fall asleep. After all, this isn't a sanatorium. Being considerate isn't one of our virtues here."

"Well, why don't you speak, then?"

"I wouldn't know what to say."

"Your past."

"That won't interest you, anyway," he said spitefully

"But the time would pass."

"At least you're honest," he said, grinning, and shoved his hands between the young woman's thighs. He felt the soft, unmistakable twitching of the skin. She's still sensitive, he thought. She isn't finished like you. Or was her skin lying?

He said softly: "It's raining outside."

"Fear," she said.

So that was it: fear.

"And you believe that you can talk it away?"

"Why don't you ask me something?" she said, and he felt her warm breath brush his face again.

"About your past?" he laughed softly.

"But that wouldn't interest you," she aped him.

"I hardly know you," he said coarsely. "Why should I be interested in the story of a stranger?"

She glided back into the dark. How silly of her to pretend she's offended, he thought; but then he noticed that she wasn't angry at all.

"He called me *dragutza*," she said, no sadness in her voice.

"Who?"

"My husband . . . he was good to me. *Dragutza* . . . a beautiful word, no? Sometimes he also called me *chérie*. He knew a little French. But that doesn't sound as beautiful."

"*Dragutza* sounds better," he said.

"We weren't married long. When they took him away the baby was just five months old."

"Of course you found a hideout for yourself and the baby after they took him away?"

"No, the police didn't know where we lived."

"Where did they arrest him?"

"At the coffeehouse."

"How careless of him," said Ranek.

She nodded. "The coffeehouse was full of informers. He knew they were there but he went anyway."

"The same old story."

"At that time there weren't many Jews left in Chernovtsy because most of them had been taken away."

"Much more noticeable in that case. So you stayed in the house?"

"Yes. Everything went well for a time. I only went outside to buy the essentials."

"Until they caught you . . ."

She nodded again.

"Where?"

"In the street." Her breath came louder. "Everything happened so fast . . . and they didn't even give me time to go home and take the baby."

"Where had you left it?"

"In its pram in the children's room."

Ranek smoked. What would she have done with a baby here, he thought; she'll be glad she's rid of it.

"The children's room was whitewashed and clean," she said, "and during the day the sun shone into it. . . . I shouldn't think of it any more."

"Better not."

"It is a good thing that my husband was not there and never heard what happened. He couldn't have endured it; he was so soft."

"Was he really?"

"In his free time he wrote poems; I don't think they were particularly good."

"So . . ."

"He was a schoolteacher. He was a little pendentic, but a good-natured person."

"You feel sorry for the good-natured ones," he said. "They are weak and can't keep themselves alive. Do you know what's happened to him?"

"No. As I told you in the hallway: he's disappeared. I have had no news."

After a while she said: "Our life ran so calmly and evenly. Ranek, wasn't it beautiful, the past . . . all that which came before . . . life without unrest?"

"I don't think back on that any more. That's all over."

"I don't believe you. There's nothing we can do against memories."

"I suppress them."

"That's possible, but not always."

He thought for a moment. Then he said, "You're right, you can't erase them completely. There are moments when everything comes back. That is like being put on the rack and the pictures grin at you stupidly. Only the dead are without memories. Only the dead know nothing."

While he talked the burning end of his cigarette moved up and down in the dark and she suspected that the cigarette was stuck to his lower lip. Every few moments she heard him sucking at the butt.

"I'm from Litesty," he said to her now. "You've probably heard of Litesty... a little Rumanian town in southern Bucovina"

"Yes, Ranek."

"We called Litesty a Jewish town because there were more Jews than Rumanians in Litesty." He moved around restlessly. "Sometimes I still think of our house," he said softly. "My father bought it when he emigrated from Poland... a small one-family house, three rooms, a kitchen and a crooked balcony from which you could see the fish market."

She thought, if only he wouldn't blow smoke in my face.

"My father was a baker," said Ranek. "The shop was in the courtyard. One window looked out at the town canal on which we used to sail paper ships when we were children." He cleared his throat. "The old man couldn't afford any employees," Ranek said. "That's why Mother helped out. She also had to look after the household. Mother was always tired and overworked."

"What did you do before, Ranek?"

"A clerk," he grinned, "with Leibowitz and Companion."

"Leibowitz and Companion had branches all over the country," she said haltingly. Clearly she had difficulty imagining the man as part of a firm which had been well-known at that time. She tried briefly to picture him at work, or, early in the morning,

with a brief case in which a few sandwiches had been concealed, but the image dissolved at once, and in the world of her imaginings she could find no place for him.

She heard him laugh suddenly. It was an odd laugh. It cut into her. She felt that his bony body would now crawl on top of her, like a spider, but it was just his unshaven face that touched her face briefly, as though he only wanted to assure himself that she had not fallen asleep.

"I had a brother," the monotonous, cracked voice said next. "His name was Fred." Ranek laughed softly. "Actually his name was Ephraim. Ephraim . . . that's a real name, but it didn't suit my father's friends from the capital, who had come into some money and whom my father respected for that reason. They paid us a visit once when my brother was half a year old, and they talked my old man into calling him Fred, just Fred. They'd discovered the name in some book . . . Fred, yes indeed . . . crazy, isn't it?"

"It's a little odd, that's true," she said.

"Ephraim was a dead uncle of ours," said Ranek. "It's a custom that the living be named after the dead so that their memory is kept alive. That's the way it is. No changing that."

"Of course," she said.

"In the synagogue when he was called to recite the Torah it was always Ephraim, nothing but Ephraim, but outside in front of people it was Fred, at home and in company. You understand what I mean, don't you?"

"Of course," she said.

He laughed again. She thought, His name sounds odd too. A little Polish. Was it also taken from a book? But she didn't feel that it was necessary to ask him about that.

"My brother worked in my father's bakery," he said. "He wouldn't have come to anything if it hadn't been for Father. He would have gone to pot somewhere. Fred was a complete nothing, a frivolous person, a weak character. It won't interest you if I tell you more about him. But if you like I can tell you something about Deborah."

"Was that your sister?"

"No, my sister-in-law. Fred's wife."

"Tell me," she said.

She thought, Let him go on talking; one can't fall asleep anyway.

"Deborah was a neighbour's daughter," said Ranek. "We knew her as a child. We used to play with her."

"One of Fred's childhood sweethearts in other words."

He shook his head. "Fred didn't much bother with her. That only started later and then it suddenly got serious. But believe me, Fred wasn't right for her at all. I never understood why she took him. He wasn't good enough to wash her feet."

"That sounds bitter," she said, smiling. "Did you dislike him or were you jealous?"

He disregarded her question and continued, "When they got married, Mother said, 'There's enough room in the house, you can live with us, it's better if a family stays together.' Then Deborah moved into our house."

"Wasn't that a mistake?" she asked. "Young married couples should get away from home. That's better."

"That's generally true. But it worked in our case. It was easy to get on with Deborah. Sometimes mother said jokingly, 'Not even the worst mother-in-law could find fault with you. . . I'd like to see the one who'd pick a quarrel with you.'"

"She must have helped a lot in the household?"

"That she did," he said. "First mother didn't want Deborah to work, she was so delicate and frail, but when Deborah had decided to do something she struck to it; she insisted on lending a hand everywhere, and the funny thing was she always picked the most difficult task, so that mother would regain some of her strength. She always said, 'But Mother is old, she's worked enough, and I'm still young.'"

The woman saw him flip the butt away, in the direction of the kitchen stove. She watched the butt die slowly on the floor.

"We all loved Deborah very much," he said softly. "You know, the longer she lived with us the more I noticed her resemblance to Mother. Deborah and Mother—that became like one and the same concept later on. Both were human beings who only seemed to exist for others, as though they had no lives of their own."

Where is Deborah? she wanted to ask. And where is your mother? But then she had second thoughts and said nothing because that seemed more advisable.

"We had an old piano in the living room," said Ranek, "... with the Sabbath candles and the box with Mother's hairpins on top of it. Deborah liked playing the piano. She had taught herself how to play. Mother sometimes asked her to play something Yiddish, and then Deborah obliged her; the devil knows where she'd learned all those Yiddish songs. . . ."

He breathed with satisfaction as the memories came back to him. "That was quite a song," he said, "... the '*Mammele*.' When she played the '*Mammele*,' people stood outside the window and listened."

"I know it," the woman said softly. "It is a beautiful song."

Suddenly Ranek said, "Deborah always wanted everything to be neat; I never understood why she left the candelabra and Mother's hairpin box on the piano."

"Because Deborah was wise," the woman said, smiling. "Deborah must have known that old people won't stand any changes."

"You are right," he said slowly. "Deborah was wise and she always knew what a person should and shouldn't do."

"She must have been a wonderful woman?"

"Yes, she was."

"Was she very unhappy with your brother? You said that he was a weakling, an irresponsible person?"

"I don't know. I even ask myself today whether she ever loved him . . . I mean the way a woman loves a man. I believe he was always a big child that would have been lost without her."

"That too is love," she said gently.

He fell silent and she had the feeling that he was struggling with something or wanted to extinguish something within himself. Later he moved very close to her again. She moved away. To the cold wall. She thought he would take her now, but all he said was, "Why don't you scratch me!"

She lay motionless.

"Don't be so finicky," he rasped. "All I have is lice!" He tug-

ged at her arm. "You have lice too, or not?"

"Yes," she said softly, "But please let's forget about it now, please."

The minutes passed as inside an hourglass.

"Why don't you try to sleep?" he asked.

"Don't you hear anything at all?"

Now he noticed it too. This whimpering outside, he thought, were those human voices? He knew they were.

"We heard something like it towards evening," he said. "Don't you remember . . . cats?"

"But that . . . those aren't cats."

"No," he said.

Their attention was diverted. The platform creaked. Someone slid down and sneaked past them. The sound of a bucket clattering along the floor. Ranek shied up because the smell began to spread. The man hunkered only an arm's length away from them, on the empty place between door and stove.

"How do you dare," Ranek snapped, "... now . . . on the chamber pot . . . in the room?"

"I'm afraid to go out," the man said, "and I can't wait till morning." The man groaned. Since Ranek did not want to pick a quarrel with him, he let himself fall back with a dull thud.

"Ranek . . ." The woman made a sudden gesture. She had half got up, and at first he thought she had lost her mind. He felt her hands searching his body.

The man on the pot was breathing heavily, then got up with much effort, opened the door a bit, and pushed the pot outside.

"Come!" she begged. "Hold me tight. Hold me very tight."

Now he understood. It was the nausea. She wanted to overcome it. He shoved her away. "No," he said roughly. "Not that way!"

She wrapped herself into her coat. For a long time he said nothing to her, and when he turned back to her later on she had fallen asleep.

The whimpering on the street had ceased. Only the noises the wind and rain made were audible. He listened for a while, then he shoved the hat over his face. But he couldn't sleep, since

now, in the quiet of the night, while he lay there quietly with his eyes closed, his memories began to torture him again. He thought of Rumania. He could see the broad corn fields again, which, at a great distance, touched the cloudless blue sky; he saw the squat huts with yellow thatched roofs in which the storks nested, and he thought of the gypsies roaming about the countryside who would play you a tune on their violins for a few pennies.

He remembered how he had walked to a neighbouring village as a small boy to fetch fresh eggs. It had been a tiny village with a white church and streets of light brown dust and wells from which you drew water since time immemorial. Returning home, he had lost his way and had strayed about for hours, and then, later on, when he had stopped on a hilltop that overlooked the city, the earth had begun to emit a sweetness—that and the warm night had made him feel sad.

"That never happened," he murmured to himself decisively. It seemed to him as if the cardboard pane in front of the window was trembling, but this was just his imagination. This restlessness, he thought, damn it. He lifted his head and then crawled forward a little, sat there for minutes with his legs crossed, staring into the darkness.



What's the matter with you today? You haven't done anything but vegetate for months and your head's been a morass and you haven't thought of anything. He stared intently at the window. Perhaps because you talked to the woman about it; it's better not to talk about the dead; otherwise they will steal up on you during the night.

He cursed. He held his head. His temples throbbed.

Wait a little, he thought, the headache will pass, as will the dizziness... it's only because you're hungry... shit. But he sat there spell-bound and stared, and the faces passed before him, slowly, one after the other, at the window against which the rain was beating.

For instance, there was the massive face of the old man with

the small watery eyes, the face of a plump man who was taciturn and weighed every word. "I see . . . I see . . . hm, be back at the synagogue at ten . . . eh . . . er at half-past ten . . . yes, what, Mamma . . . beans with chopped onions? Fine, very good." His eyes became moist; sometimes they seemed to gush like springs. "Deborah isn't going to make a fire today on the Sabbath . . . eh . . . hm . . . call the *schickse* from next door. Boiled chicken? Fine, very good."

His mother's worn out face. Her tired mouth. Now she asked anxiously. "Do you want some gefilte fish, Ranek?" As a child she told him fairy tales. "Rani, Rani, look . . ."

Fred was there too. He grinned at him. And he disappeared on the other side of the window. And then Deborah appeared. She strode past; her movements were as calm and discreet as always.

Better lie down on your stomach, he thought, then you won't have to see any of this.

The familiar knocking above his head.

"What . . . what's the matter?"

"My arse hurts all over," Rosenberg said. Ranek hunched down, lay motionless, after a while felt himself falling asleep.



This night he dreamed that he wandered once more through the streets of Litesty, the streets of a city no longer contaminated by Jews. No one recognized the man who had returned. He talked to a few people they shook their heads. He showed them the scar on the back of his head. Their minds were a blank.

He walked and walked, and suddenly he stood in front of his father's house, the house with the crooked balcony from which you could see the fish market. "What are you looking for in the empty house?" came to his mind, and he wanted to turn back . . . away . . . run away, but an unidentifiable impulse drove him on. And he walked and walked . . . through the wide gate, which, oddly enough, was not locked, past the bakery, up the stairs.

He kicked the door open. Paralyzing silence. Only his own breath and the rhythmical beating of his heart filled the whole

room . . . then the creaking of his own steps. He walked carefully as though he were in the dark, as was his habit. He stood quietly in the kitchen, for a long time, looked around, smiled, began to take off his jacket. He hung it next to the old coffee grinder, on a long nail that he had hammered into the sideboard himself months ago. She never liked it when he did that, he thought. He also hung up his hat; it was Nathan's hat. What would she say if she knew . . . he thought, and was amused.

The cups and dishes smiled at him out of the cupboard; everything was a little dusty. He took out a cup, filled it to the brim with water, and drank, then put it carelessly on the kitchen table.

He stepped into the living room; it seemed desolate. Otherwise it was unchanged. The curtains by the window were not spotless, but it had always been like that; after all, Deborah did not have time to take care of everything.

The fruit bowl with apples and pears was still standing on the table, but the plate with beans and chopped onions, which used to stand there for the old man, was gone.

He noticed the candelabra. He was secretly surprised—today was the Sabbath and his mother usually took the candelabra down from the piano; she would light the candles then and say her prayers with her eyes closed.

Then he heard music.

He blinked . . . and suddenly he noticed Deborah sitting on the stool at the piano—no one had been there a moment ago. She was playing and not paying him any heed. She had been dead for months, the dream figure, which was himself, thought, and smiled. She had been shot together with the others after the soldiers had found their hideout in the cellar. How nice of her to return for a few moments and play something for you, the dream figure thought.

Deborah was not beautiful. Her figure with its small breasts and the lean shoulders that sloped forward a little was formless; her face irregular. But it was a dear face that one liked to look at; it was so soulful.

He wanted to light a cigarette, but he remembered that smok-

ing was prohibited on the Sabbath. Actually she wasn't allowed to play the piano either, it occurred to him.

She turned around now. "Hello," she said.

"Hello," he replied mechanically. Then he said, "Piano playing is not permitted on the Sabbath; it's against the law."

Deborah smiled sympathetically. "There is no Sabbath any more . . . and no law . . . He died at the time."

"Who?" he whispered.

She looked at him with astonishment. "God," she said slowly.

Deborah got up and stepped up to him. "Should I play something for you?" and without awaiting his reply she sat back down.

"The '*Mammele*' " she said. He listened numbly. When the last notes had died out, she said roguishly, "I know what you would like to hear now . . . something Rumanian . . . a *Doina* for instance, or . . . *foaie verde* . . . the song of the green leaves."

And then Deborah had disappeared, the stool in front in front of the piano . . . empty . . . Startled, he opened his eyes.

* * *

You haven't really slept. You have only thought all this while you were half awake. This has been happening more and more often to you lately. You no longer know the difference between dreams and thoughts. But you aren't mad yet. You are only hungry.

He was completely soaked, even his hands were sweating. Suddenly he had an idea; it came and would not let go of him.

The woman still lay huddled in front of him, but he had the feeling she had awakened.

Ranek stood up, took his jacket, and put it on.

Suddenly the woman stood beside him. "Ranek! Have you gone mad!"

"I want to try to find some grub," he said hoarsely.

6

Dvorsky was an old acquaintance of Ranek who lived opposite the sanctuary in a cellar below street level. The building to which the cellar belonged had been wiped off the face of the earth long ago, but Dvorsky, who always knew his way out of a predicament, had cleared the cellar of its debris and made himself at home there with his wife and his baby. For a time they had lived there by themselves, but then they had withdrawn into a corner and sublet the leftover space.

If you wanted to go into the cellar you had to move a tarpaulin that was stretched over a huge hole, to the side. Steps of stamped earth led downwards.

Ranek tried to be as quiet as possible, but on the last step he slipped and fell. He lay on the damp floor for a while, then he lifted his head; he did not perceive anything else here either except darkness and the snoring of many people. Because he was familiar with the cellar and was able to find Dvorsky's place even in the dark he crawled there now without bumping into anything.

Dvorsky was awake. He had heard him. His anxious voice :
"Who's there?"

"Ranek."

"Ranek?" The voice sounded surprised but less worried. "At this hour?"

Ranek got to his feet now. He felt dizzy again. "Just wanted to see how you were doing," he said. "We're neighbours again . . . just wanted to—"

"You probably didn't come over just to admire my ugly mug," Dvorsky interrupted him coldly.

Dvorsky got up from his place; one of his legs was too short and Ranek now heard him limping through the dark cellar. Soon a lamp was lighted. It stood on a crudely constructed table by the wall. Next to it stood the crate in which the baby slept.

The baby started to cry. The people on the floor awoke and scrambled up; some of them cursed; a woman spat angrily in the direction of the crate; a man who lay next to the excited woman pinched her a few times in the behind and calmed her down, then lighted himself a cigarette, grinning.

Dvorsky walked toward Ranek now. He looked closely into Ranek's face. "Aren't you feeling well?" he asked suddenly.

"A little dizzy," Ranek said softly, "... don't worry ... it'll pass."

"Sit down a moment." Dvorsky looked around for a place where Ranek could sit. "Sit down on the sofa," he said then.

Ranek could still remember exactly what the sofa looked like—an old trunk covered with sacks on which one could sit quite comfortably. He did not wait to be asked a second time. He sat down panting, supported his head with his hands, and thought, Don't puke again ... not now ... not now.

The baby had not calmed down. It was still screaming and kicking. Dvorsky limped cursing up to the crate and began shaking it angrily back and forth.

Dvorsky was a former coachman. He came from the same small town as Ranek. On the other side, in Litesty, Dvorsky had been a respectable citizen; he had only cheated travellers from out of town who did not know the exact fare, but never people from Litesty itself. Dvorsky had attended synagogue regularly at the time, he put his phylactery on even in the mornings and never forgot to bring his wife a plump chicken on the Sabbath. Here, in the ghetto, Dvorsky was almost exclusively engaged in shady dealings. He was sufficiently cold-blooded to handle dangerous situations and had no compunction about cheating. He was not a big man on the black market, only a small-time operator, but he knew the right sources and had the right connections and

Ranek needed him. They had been in on a number of deals already. Occasionally Ranek would undress a corpse and bring Dvorsky the clothes, and Dvorsky would resell them. Ranek would receive food in exchange.

Dvorsky waited until the baby was quiet, then he caressed it gently with his big, coarse hands and covered it up. He turned back to Ranek. Because he thought Ranek was here on business he asked cagily: "What did you bring with you?"

"First tell me what you have," Ranek said evasively.

"Onions!" Dvorsky said. He sniffed into the air and rubbed his hands together. "Onions!" he repeated. "Well, how about that?"

Ranek shook his head.

"Half a loaf of ersatz bread," Dvorsky said.

"What else?"

"You can also have some soybeans...because it's you. Actually I wanted to keep the beans...for my old woman...you understand, right? But because it's you..."

"Is that all?"

"I've no meat at the moment," Dvorsky said coldly. He scratched his head and stared at Ranek. "You used to bring me shoes at one time," he said slowly, "...you know...the shoes of the dead."

Ranek nodded.

"The Ukrainian peasants don't want anything except overcoats and suits at the moment," Dvorsky went on, "...but on the other side of the border...among the Rumanian peasants...there's a great demand for shoes. It's the fashion over there these days. The peasants are really sharp for shoes. They don't want to walk barefoot any more all of a sudden, since the shoes of the Jews have become so cheap."

Dvorsky went on talking for a while, but Ranek was not listening; there was a great rushing noise in his ears. "The best thing is to put my cards on the table," Ranek said suddenly. "I didn't bring anything with me. I came here because I was hungry, and because I can't stand it any more. You have to give me something to eat."

"Nothing doing," Dvorsky said.

"A piece of bread," Ranek begged, "... just one slice."

"No," Dvorsky said. "You know that I can't give you anything for free."

"I don't want it for free. Lend me something. I'll pay you back."

"I can't do it. I don't even give credit to the people I have living here as tenants. Anyone who can't pay gets kicked out." Dvorsky made an unmistakable gesture with his hand. "I want to sleep now. Come back another time when you have something to exchange."

Ranek did not budge. "I have something for you," he said quickly. He swallowed as if suddenly were unable to breathe. "... Give me one slice of bread ... and I have something for you."

"So, after all!" Dvorsky smirked. "What is it?"

"A woman," Ranek said softly.

Dvorsky flinched. He looked at Ranek out of screwed-up eyes.

"I brought her into the sanctuary tonight," Ranek said. "She followed me there. She's asleep now. You can go to her. I'll wait outside in the hallway. It's pitch dark in the room. And she won't even know that it's you. She'll think ... it's me, you understand ... because ... because it's that dark."

"Sure, I understand." Dvorsky grinned.

"You want her?"

Dvorsky seemed to be struggling with himself, but then he shook his massive head. "No," he said, "... not today ... perhaps another time."

"Why not today?"

"Fucked my old woman tonight ... don't feel like it now."

"Can't do it twice in a row, eh?" Ranek mocked, but his voice was full of despair; he was constantly thinking, the bread, the damned bread, the damned bastard.

"Can you do it twice in a row?" Dvorsky said, and suddenly broke out in laughter, his unpleasant, gurgling laugh, which he had taken up here in the cellar. Ranek let him laugh; it no longer mattered to him. He stood up silently and staggered towards the exit. Slowly, dazed, he walked upstairs, and still heard Dvorsky

calling after him : "Watch out when you cross the street, don't let them catch you!" then he stepped out into the night.

* * *

It had stopped raining. A few stars were visible and a streak of moonlight looked wearily out of the gap in the clouds.

Ranek quickly crossed the deserted street. It took him a moment to find a hole in the fence, then he stepped into the yard and trudged panting toward the lonely ruin. In the hallway he groped like a blind man along the cracked wall, finally found the crooked banister and started to climb up.

He didn't really know himself why he stopped halfway up the stairs, turned around, and climbed back down. But suddenly he found himself before the hole under the stairs where he had hidden Levy a few hours before.

"Levy," he said softly. "Levy . . . it's me . . . don't be afraid . . . it's me."

He removed a few boards and now he could see the motionless body. Then he knelt down beside the man and shook him.

Levy made no sound. Ranek lighted a match. How many times had it been that he had searched a body in the dark? But that didn't matter now. He wanted to have light. He wanted to make sure. And he shone the match into the face of the man whose successor he had become.

Now Levy moved his lips. He couldn't speak any more, nor could he turn his head, only his eyes moved slowly sideways like two heavy pellets of lead, as though the light were a magnet that attracted them. His eyes showed no fear now. They were wide and calm but were filled with a mute accusation, a horrible, wordless accusation. He's dying, it struck Ranek. The old woman should be told! Perhaps she wanted to see Levy once more? Ranek dismissed the idea at once, because he had something much more important to do.

The match went out. He did not bother to light another but proceeded to search Levy at once. The dying man was wearing no jacket or pants; two flour sacks that had been slit open were wrapped around his naked body. Ranek did not bother with the

flour sacks; he touched Levy's legs . . . and now his fingers felt the shoes.

"Levy," he whispered, "you don't need the shoes any more, damn it. You don't need them any more."

Suddenly he felt like a vulture. A vulture in front of a carcass. No, he thought, not yet, not a carcass yet.

Ranek's fingers had gone stiff from their exposure to the cold and they moved only slowly and awkwardly. He felt his blood shoot into his head while he bent down; his temples throbbed and ached. When he had finally untied the knotted shoelaces he sat down exhausted beside the dying man to catch his breath.

It was uncannily quiet in the hallway. Ranek leaned his head against the wall and stared, brooding at the black stairway. He was completely aware that this was not a usual shoe theft he was planning; something like that was considered a serious crime here. Not even the most hard-boiled dare to plunder a dying man; they preferred to wait until he was dead and took his things from him only then. . . . "That's right," he murmured to himself, ". . . that's absolutely right; you wait a bit . . . that way it's decent. When he's dead he can't see it, then he doesn't know it any more."

Ranek sat by the wall a few more minutes, then he gathered himself up and went back to work on the dying man. What did all this matter to him? He was hungry, he wanted the shoes; he would take them to Dvorsky and Dvorsky would give him some grub. And that was the most important thing! More important than all this moral stuff. . . .

One shoe plopped into the mud. The other one gave him more trouble. The shoe sat like a cast on the foot. He pulled and pulled. It was no use. Furious now he propped one foot against the dying man's stomach, and again he grabbed the shoe and pulled. This time it came loose.

Then he shuffled back to the cellar.

* * *

"Where did you get the shoes from?"

"From a corpse," Ranek lied.

Dvorsky took the shoes and sniffed at them. "They still smell of sweat," he said slowly.

"The man hasn't been dead for long," Ranek answered evasively.

Dvorsky turned the shoes around every way. "Too bad," he said in his business voice, "the top leather is torn, the soles have holes in them . . . can't give you much for them."

Ranek said nothing since he noticed that Dvorsky's wife, who was sitting up in her place was staring over at him, lifted her arm and signalled to Dvorsky. Dvorsky did not see it. Ranek detested the woman. She had a haughty expression on her face. Her eyes were like a trap, insidious and dangerous. Now she got up and came over to them. Her dress was crumpled; she looked ill-kempt and sleepy. "The shoes aren't worth more than a couple of onions," she said cuttingly to Dvorsky. "Don't give him any more than that." The woman did not even look at Ranek; she behaved as if he weren't present.

Dvorsky laughed. "You heard what she said"—he turned to Ranek—"she always has the last word."

"Out of the question," Ranek said with determination. "That's ridiculous . . . a few lousy onions for genuine leather shoes. I won't do it."

The woman became furious. "Who does he think he is, anyway." She tugged at her husband's sleeve. "What impudence. A beggar like that . . . comes here in the middle of the night . . ." She broke off suddenly because the baby had started to bawl again. "Now see what you've done," she panted, letting go of Dvorsky's shirt. "You and your deals! Now the child's awake again."

Dvorsky gave Ranek a slight push. "Could you rock the crate for a while. Go over there for a second. My wife and I will discuss the matter in the meantime."

Ranek nodded mechanically. He knew the woman would be even more irritated if he said no to her husband. He tottered towards the crate. Not bad at all to let the two alone now, he thought; let them talk it over. They'll give you something a little better than the onions once you've shown them that you won't

let yourself be cheated. That's the way to do it! Simply don't accept and ask for more. One can't give in, damn it, that's all.

He rocked the crate doggedly back and forth; however, he did not succeed in quieting the baby. Every so often he stole a glance at the couple who were whispering quietly and evidently could not agree. That damned little black witch of a woman, he thought. Ruins everything for one, always has to add her two bits. Then he remembered that he should be even more on his guard with Dvorsky, whose imperturbable, cold calm was the opposite of his wife's manner.

Dvorsky called to him now! "Damn it, why don't you give him the dummy!"

Ranek looked vainly for it. He wondered where Dvorsky had dug up a dummy in the ghetto; luxury articles like that couldn't be had anywhere. "I can't find it!" he called back.

"It must be somewhere in the cradle."

Ranek rummaged once more through the crate. He found a chunk of kohlrabi. He held it up.

"Put it in his mouth!" Dvorsky shouted.

So that's the dummy, Ranek thought. The kohlrabi had been whittled to a point; it just fitted into the tiny mouth. The baby blew up its cheeks in despair, but did not utter another sound.

Ranek's headache was as bad as ever. The sight of the kohlrabi only made him more conscious of his hunger, and the empty feeling in his stomach became more and more acute. And because he could not bear it any longer he flipped open the rusty pocketknife he always carried with him, and cut off a piece of the kohlrabi.

Dvorsky and his wife were paying him no attention. Ranek thought that they wouldn't notice what had happened... he had only taken a little piece. He chewed it slowly. It had a strange aftertaste, like urine. It probably had been lying in the crate for some time. Don't think of it, he told himself... don't think of it! It's good now. It's much better now. Now it tastes like real kohlrabi. It has no aftertaste any more. It tastes wonderful.

He couldn't resist and cut off a second piece and stuck it

greedily into his mouth. And then a third. The rest of the dummy looked so unprepossessing now that he became afraid the child might choke on it. And so he picked up the remnant of the dummy and ate it.

Now the child started to bawl again. Dvorsky limped angrily to the crate. "What's the matter now?"

"It's lost the dummy."

Dvorsky searched the crate grumpily. "It's not in the cradle," he said then. He began to search the floor around the crate. His wife brought the lamp over and helped him. A man's voice cursed: "Why don't you stop it, one doesn't get any peace at all any more!" And then the voice proceeded to damn the baby: "One should drown the little screaming bastard, drown it, drown it!"

"Shut up," Dvorsky said furiously, "drown yourself!"

"You ought to drown it," the man repeated.

"If you don't like it, move out!" said Dvorsky.

"A griper," the woman said. "Let him move out. There are enough people waiting for his place who would pay twice as much."

"Of course," said Dvorsky.

"How strange," the woman said, "the dummy has disappeared."

"I don't understand it either," said Dvorsky.

Suddenly the woman pointed at Ranek. "He stole it for sure! How could you be so stupid and let him take care of the child?"

Dvorsky gave Ranek the once-over. He said, "You heard what she said!"

"I heard it."

"Was it you?"

"No," Ranek said, grinning uncertainly. "Don't listen to her! There's no one she trusts. You know what she's like."

"I believe you," said Dvorsky, "because I can't prove it." He turned to his wife. "You stay with the child now!"

"I will, I will," she said.

Dvorsky threw a worried glance at the crate, then he drew Ranek close to the cellar stairs.

"Two pounds of onions and half a loaf of ersatz flour bread for the shoes," he whispered.

"No," said Ranek.

"My wife only wanted to give you onions. You can thank me for the bread."

"I could get a whole sackful of corn flour for the shoes."

"For new shoes, yes," said Dvorsky hesitantly, "not for muck like that. Take a good look at them!"

"They can be patched," said Ranek. "The peasants, the ones on the other side of the border, aren't that finicky; that's first-rate quality as far as they're concerned. And you can get a good price for them."

Dvorsky smelled the shoes again. Then he suddenly stuck them under Ranek's nose—as if he knew Ranek would be afraid of this smell. Ranek didn't dare breathe. He felt his hands tremble. He pushed the shoes away from his face.

"They still smell fresh eh?" Dvorsky said slowly. "You can't make a monkey of me. There's something fishy. The man you robbed of his shoes wasn't dead yet, that's for sure. I shouldn't buy them at all."

Ranek knew that Dvorsky only wanted to force down the price. He regained control immediately. "Don't give me your preacher's bit," Ranek said cuttingly. "You don't frighten me."

They continued bargaining for a while longer. Ranek did not give in. Finally they agreed upon two pounds of corn flour, half a loaf of ersatz flour bread, and a couple of onions.

Dvorsky accompanied him outside.

"How quiet it has suddenly become!"

"Yes."

"You can't hear a sound from the street. Nor anything from the railway station."

"True. That's the way it always is. Suddenly it becomes quiet."

Dvorsky nodded. He shook hands with him. "From now on we work together again?"

"Sure."

Dvorsky cleared his throat. Suddenly he whispered: "I know whose shoes they are. I just remembered."

"What do you remember?"

"There's only one man in the sanctuary who has shoes of this kind."

"You keep your trap shut."

Dvorsky nodded.

"On account of the old woman," Ranek hissed, "his mother . . . her sleeping place is next to mine. I don't want her to find out. I don't want her to know . . ."

"You can depend on it."

* * *

The sound of steps approaching outside on the stairway. Sarah listened intently. Ranek is back, she thought with a sigh of relief. She left her place and squatted down by the door. She did not dare to stand upright, because she did not want to be noticed. She had been unable to sleep during Ranek's absence because the man who slept under the stove had come over to her once. He hadn't done anything; he had only sneaked up to her as if he wanted to find out whether Ranek was still there. Then he had turned back. Perhaps he did not dare to do anything before he was sure how long Ranek would be gone. And he wanted to wait a while longer. For if Ranek didn't come soon, he had probably been caught . . . She didn't know what the man under the stove looked like. She had only smelled him. And his stench she would never be able to forget.

Now she heard Ranek coughing on the landing . . . he spat . . . and shortly after pushed against the door. She scrambled out of the way when the door jumped open, but not quickly enough to keep Ranek from stumbling over her in the dark. "Damn it," he cursed, "who's that?"

"Sarah," she whispered.

"What are you squatting by the door for, damn it?" He kicked her lightly in the belly.

"I . . . I only wanted . . ." she stammered, ". . . I heard you coming and I thought—"

"All right, all right," he said brusquely. He handed her his hat, in which he had put the food.

"Where did you get that?" she asked in a voice full of admiration.

"Don't ask so many questions!" He pushed her to her place and ordered her to keep quiet.

"I'm going to go get the lamp," he said. "Be back in a moment." His voice became softer. "In the meantime start slicing the bread. Leave the rest of the stuff in the hat and watch that no one takes any of it. People steal around here, got it?"

"Yes," she said. He handed her his pocketknife, and then he left her alone.

Again the walk to the window, across the many bodies. This time he moved as carefully as a cat. The control the mind had won over the body, now that there was hope again, probably helped to steady his legs. Now he knew he would live through this night. He not only had a bed, he also had something to eat . . . and if you happened to live from hand to mouth you were satisfied with that and thought of nothing else. He had learned long ago to accept each single day as a precious gift and to be grateful for it.

He found the lamp without having to grope around for it. He lighted it. The weak glow did not reach far and only illumined the legs hanging down from the wooden platform and a few shadowy bodies on the floor near the window. He could hear a voice coming from the direction of the long wall on the other side of the platform: "Why are you turning on the lamp in the middle of the night?" The voice was so weak it was difficult to tell whether it belonged to a boy or a woman.

"Don't let it disturb you," Ranek said in a friendly tone of voice. "Sleep on. I'll turn it off again in a minute." He paid the stranger no further attention.

Sarah was still busy cutting the hard, crusty bread. Her face was contorted from the exertion. "The knife doesn't cut," she said when Ranek sat down beside her. "That's the bread's fault," he said, "not the knife's."

He had put the lamp on the floor. He unwrapped his wet foot rags and warmed his cold feet on the glass cover of the lamp. They did not talk while they ate. Ranek ate voraciously

even though he had taken a few bites of the bread on his way back from the cellar. The woman showed more self-control; it was evident that she had been here only a short time. It had been only a short time since she had left the civilized world and it would probably take a few weeks before she could smack her lips as loudly and devour her food as rapidly as Ranek. He now furtively picked an onion out of the hat and stuck it into his mouth without even peeling it. He spat out the peel bit by bit. He purposely did not give her any of the onions for fear of rousing her appetite unnecessarily. For he envied her every bit she ate.

Now she began to speak: "You don't have to play hide-and-seek with me. I know there are onions in the hat."

He gave a forced laugh. He said nothing. Then he continued to chew the black bread.

Suddenly she nudged him and whispered: "Someone is watching us . . . the old woman next to you."

He nodded indifferently. "I know," he said.

"You shouldn't have turned on the light!"

"She's just hungry. It's her own fault if she wants to watch us. Most of the people here live from potato peels and garbage; they're always envious when someone is eating something half decent." He gave a self-satisfied grin and licked his chapped lips.

"You know," she said, "I keep imagining that someone is staring down at us through the cracks in the boards."

"We should plug up that crack one of these days," Ranek said. "In general, however, we can't bother with details like that. Get this into your head: don't bother about other people. You must not care what others are doing, whether they're eating, screwing or dying . . . it doesn't matter . . . everyone only cares for himself here."

"Of course," she admitted meekly, "you should know."

Before extinguishing the lamp he checked the valuables in his hat. Then he concealed them carefully with the young woman's underclothes.

"You don't need that stuff at the moment?"

"No . . . I don't need it."

"It's better if the hat is covered."

"One certainly can't say of you that you are careless." She smiled.

She wrapped the coat around her shoulders and made herself as comfortable as possible.

* * *

Dawn. The first weak light entered the room along the edges of the cardboard pane. The light looked like mist, like a veil gradually slipping in from the outside, whitening only the ceiling and the upper part of the walls while the floor and the sleeping mass of people still stayed in the shadow of the night.

Ranek squatted underneath the edge of the platform. His eyes were fixed on the opposite wall. He could already distinguish the various newspaper scraps that had been used to cover up some of the holes and cracks in the wall. Exactly in the centre of the wall a board with clothes hooks had been attached. The hooks were empty. No one was so simple-minded as to hang his jacket there overnight. The hooks were sometimes used during the day, but usually only as long as the owner of the jacket was in the room. A clothes-line was affixed to one of the hooks. The line ran diagonally through the room. The line was empty too.

Ranek stood up now and stepped out into the room. Slowly he walked down the steep stairway. Cold morning air blew into the hallway; he knew how susceptible he was and how easily he caught cold, but he did not turn back because he wanted to check what shape Levy was in.

Levy was dead. His naked grey feet stuck out from under the sack. Ranek kneeled down beside him. He pulled the lids down over his dead eyes. Then he pushed the legs deeper into the hole under the stairway, so that no one would step on them.

When Ranek went back the picture of the corpse pursued him; it stayed and refused to be erased, not even when he closed the door, shivering, and the warmth of the room accepted him again.

It was still too early to stay up; the day would last too long otherwise and therefore he lay back on his place between the

two women. The young woman was still asleep; the old woman was awake and stared silently at him.

He turned his back on the old woman and nuzzled up to the young one because he was still chilled and because he felt this would be the best way to forget the dead man. . . . Forget what you did to him yesterday, he thought, trying to calm himself; you always have to stand up for what you did, and you should never think back on it.

Suddenly he flinched, because he felt the old woman's slack hand on his shoulder.

"What do you want from me?" he stammered.

"Did you see him?" she whispered behind his back.

"I saw him," he whispered back derisively. Now he turned around. "Why don't you go out yourself?"

"Because it isn't light enough yet," she said anxiously. She raised herself a little. "Did you talk to him?"

"Yes," he lied.

"What did he say?" she asked eagerly.

"Nothing special. He just asked how you were."

"And what did you tell him?"

"That you're all right."

The old woman nodded. "I knew all along that he'd live through the typhus crisis," she said. "You know I didn't doubt it for a moment. I told you yesterday, didn't I, he's a tough one?"

"There's no doubt on that score," Ranek reassured her.

"You know," she lisped, "I was only afraid that he might be cold lying out there . . . he was only wearing a double sack . . . and I didn't have a blanket for him . . . I mean, I don't own something like that . . . you can see for yourself . . . no blanket, nothing to cover myself up with . . . and I didn't know where I could borrow one for him. Who would lend you anything? You know yourself how it is."

"You shouldn't reproach yourself," Ranek said again. "You really have no reason to."

The old woman sighed several times. Then she asked, "Didn't he say anything else to you?"

"No. He didn't say anything else."

The old woman was staring at nothing in particular. Then she turned her face back towards him as though something had suddenly occurred to her. "When it gets light outside I'll have to find a place where I can put him!"

"The hallway will do for the time being," Ranek replied dryly.

"No, he can't stay in the hallway!" She repeated: "He can't stay there." And then she said the same sentence a few more times. Her voice sounded so drawled and monotonous as if she were incapable of becoming excited about anything, as though what she was mouthing were not her own ideas at all. But to his astonishment she suddenly scrambled to her feet and held her hands clasped to her stomach. "What's the matter?" Ranek asked, frightened.

"Nothing. Nothing at all." She lay down again, but seconds later she twisted on the floor like a wounded animal, keeping her hands clasped to her stomach. She got on her knees and crawled forward moaning, scrambling up again, and threw up near the kitchen stove. There someone screamed furiously. The spot on the dark floor above which the old woman held her twitching head, moved. A man clambered on his feet, got up, and ran against the old woman. Ranek saw him hitting her with a piece of wood. He screamed continuously, "You damned old beast . . . right on me . . . right on top of me!"

Ranek heard the old woman bawl and quickly left his place and grabbed the man's arms. The man was just a skeleton. He had had his fit and had no strength left. Ranek pushed him effortlessly to the ground. "Don't try it again!" he said threateningly. "Let the woman be! She didn't do it on purpose."

He helped the sobbing woman back to her place. He wiped the blood from her face. He took the rest of his bread from the hat and gave it to her, and suddenly he knew he was doing all this only in order to repay her for what he had done to her son.

The old woman ate hastily. She had stopped sobbing. She was famished and concentrated all her attention on the bread. When she had finished she said to him, "You are decent."

Ranek had to grin. Her son had said the same thing, he thought.

"That hasn't happened to me here that one person gives another something of himself," the old woman whispered.

If you knew the score, he thought, if you knew that the bread actually belongs to you . . .

"If you live so close together as you do here," he said, "then there's nothing wrong with helping each other occasionally. It doesn't really make any difference."

The old woman snuggled up to him. "I'm sorry that I had such a low opinion of you yesterday," she said. "You are really a good person." She stroked his hands thankfully. And he did not dare push her away because he pictured the dead son again in his mind's eye.

"You won't hold it against me, will you, that I behaved so badly before," she said, "I mean, because . . . I puked. But you know . . . the excitement yesterday . . . and the worry . . . the worry . . . and then the certainty that he's alive. That was too much for me."

"I understand completely what you mean," said Ranek. "Something like that could happen to anyone."

"I'm so glad he's alive," she said.

"I can imagine."

"So glad," she said, "so glad."

The old woman burped and began to chew the bread. "If you hadn't hidden him under the boards the police would have taken him away for sure."

"Yes," Ranek said hoarsely.

"Will you also help me find a place for him somewhere? I am an old woman. I can't manage it alone."

"Of course."

"And you'll let him back in his rightful place when he's all well again and comes back? You'll do that, won't you? I know you will! Some other place will have become free in the meantime. You're capable. A man like you always finds something. You'll manage."

Ranek knew that the old woman was in a state of intoxication at this moment. The bread had taken effect. He knew himself what that was like. Physically and psychologically she felt com-

pletely well. Life looked rosy again. Everything looked good and promising again.

She was still caressing his hands and still he did not dare withdraw them. For he felt as if it was not the dead man's mother who was caressing him but the dead man himself.

She opened her dress and laid his hands cautiously, gratefully, tenderly on her breasts, those shrivelled, wrinkled breasts that nauseated him.

"Perhaps I look older than I am," she said softly, "but I'm not old yet. It's just that life is so hard. That ruins a person."

7

A great variety of useful objects lay about outside the house : fragments of furniture that could be used as firewood, and utensils and equipment that had tumbled into the yard when the house had collapsed. Among them were also objects from the inhabited room which the people had thrown out for lack of space. Many months' rubbish had piled up, coal dust and ashes, garbage, torn shoe soles, the contents of emptied chamber pots, rags and paper cartons.

Ranek, who was looking for an old pot among the refuse, came across the skeleton of a cat. Next to the cat lay a few slightly charred picture frames, the pendulum of a clock without the clock itself, and a little farther on a rusty hammer with a broken handle. He picked up the pendulum and tossed it away again. He also picked up the hammer. He looked at it closely and felt it might come in handy. Then he put it back. He would try to remember the spot.

Finally he found what he was looking for. Though the pot was made of thin, badly dented tin and looked more like a big can, it would serve his purpose, and that, of course, was the main thing.

There was a well not far from the outhouse. Ranek went there now. The heavy iron chain that wound around the wooden wheel had been torn off, the wheel itself had been lifted out of its joints. The bucket was still whole. The people had tied a rope around its handle and anyone with a little strength left could manage it.

Ranek lowered the bucket into the well. He filled it to the brim and tried to pull it back up, but he was too weak to do it. He kept jerking the rope back and forth until half the water had spilled out. Then he pulled the half-full bucket up, gasping.

While still busy washing the pot he heard a sudden scream from the direction of the ruin. The scream was not repeated; all remained quiet for a while but then a horrible moaning started. That's coming from the hallway, he thought; the old woman has probably discovered the corpse. He filled the pot with water now and went back to the house.

A few people stepped out of the entrance. They were laughing and talking. They had overslept and wanted to catch a little fresh air now.

Ranek sneaked past the old woman. Before he walked upstairs he quickly took a few of the fence boards with him which he had piled on top of Levy last night, and which still lay by the stairs. They're not needed here any more, he thought; high time for them to be used as firewood. He wanted to make a fire now and cook himself a decent breakfast.

* * *

Most of the people had left the room. A few who were half dead had remained behind; they lay apathetically on their places; they couldn't sleep any more, but they lacked the will to get up. The only one who was still asleep and snoring loudly and healthily was the man under the stove.

* * *

Ranek had been busy for more than half an hour in front of the

stove. The wood wasn't really dry and burned badly. The water started to boil only now. He poured some corn flour into it, waited a little and then started to stir the foaming yellow stuff diligently with a long wooden splinter.

"It's taking a damned long time," said Sigi, who stood behind Ranek the entire time without taking his eyes off the pot.

"Don't gripe so much," Ranek said. "I'm no magician." Without thinking twice Ranek had promised him corn yesterday, and now he had to keep his promise whether he liked it or not.

Sigi showed an entirely different side of himself today and pretended that he and Ranek were old buddies who had stuck together through thick and thin and would naturally share all their possessions. Also a good breakfast. That's a smooth operator, Ranek thought, you're not going to get rid of him as easily as that. Sigi had been overly eager when he helped him make the fire, cleaned the oven for him, carried out the ashes and split the wood.

"How much longer?" Sigi started again.

"Until it's ready," said Ranek.

"I know . . . I just wanted—"

"Can't wait, can you?"

Sigi said, grinning. "I can wait . . . to spite you. I could stand here all day without falling over."

"Don't talk such nonsense, better get some spoons."

"There are enough spoons on the stove. You take them. You don't ask any questions. Or are you embarrassed?" Sigi giggled.

"Kiss my arse," said Ranek. He looked mockingly at Sigi over his shoulder, then he turned back to the pot. His right hand hurt from the continuous stirring; he switched and now continued stirring with his left hand.

Suddenly Sigi asked, "Where's the woman you brought with you last night?" Sigi's grin was like the frozen grimace of a corpse. "Where is she?" he asked again as if he had noted her absence only now.

"Gone," said Ranek. "She's looking for another place to sleep." Sigi nodded.

"She'll come back of course," said Ranek softly, "because she won't find anything else."

"There's nothing else."

"I'd be glad if she stayed away."

"One mouth less, right, no?"

"Right."

"Last night, when you came in with her it was dark. I couldn't see what she looked like. Was she skinny?"

"She was fat," said Ranek.

"Fat . . ." Sigi whispered enviously. And he inquired further :
"Was she young?"

"I think so," Ranek said, "even though I didn't take a close look at her face."

After the corn-meal mush was finally done, Ranek pushed the pot to the very edge of the stove, away from the flame. He licked the sticky splinter and placed it next to the stovepipe. Then he picked out a spoon. Sigi, who had taken one some time ago, whispered something into his ear. Ranek nodded. Sigi was right. The man under the stove had stopped snoring and presumably was awake. It was better if they ate on the platform, so that he wouldn't see.

Soon they had made themselves comfortable on the planks. They squatted across from each other.

"Give me your plate," said Ranek.

"But why?"

"So that we can divide the stuff in two. One of us will eat out of the pot, the other from the dish."

Sigi was drooling; his hands were trembling while he clutched anxiously at the steaming pot. "We can eat from the same pot," Sigi said quickly, "you from one, I from the other side."

Ranek consented. Too late he noticed that he had been tricked—Sigi devoured huge spoonfuls without chewing them or caring if they were hot. Ranek could not keep up with him.

"Don't be in such a rush," Ranek said furiously. "Want to eat everything yourself?"

Sigi didn't seem to hear, he continued to eat at the same extraordinary rate. Ranek took the pot away from him. "Enough,"

he said. "You pig!" Sigi grunted, and wiped his mouth. "I think I'm going to shit it all out again at once," he said plaintively. "It was too good."

* * *

Later on, when Sigi was gone and Ranek felt unwatched, he emptied the leftovers onto a piece of newspaper. It came to a lump the size of a fist. He would have it for supper. Cold corn-meal mush can be sliced like bread and if you hold your nose while you eat it can even taste like bread. There also was a little flour left over and a few onions. Ranek packed all the food together into a little package and hid it in a thicket behind the ruin.

* * *

He had rested for a few hours. He had thought and made plans. It was never good to do that; you wasted your time and felt even more rotten afterwards. In the afternoon he decided to go for a walk. Change your surroundings a bit, he thought, that'll give you some other ideas, that's as important sometimes as having some grub. Perhaps you'll go to the Bazaar? Or to Lupu's coffee-house? There's always something going on at Lupu's.

When he stepped out of the house he noticed the crowd by the fence. He also saw two Ukrainians who were employed carrying corpses. He went hesitantly across the yard. He wanted to walk by, but then, quite involuntarily, he stopped to watch Levy being placed on his bier.

Ranek had stopped beside Sigi. Sigi nodded merrily to him and pointed at the sturdy bearers. They had placed Levy on a thin board and were tying him fast.

One of the bearers said grumpily, "One more knot . . . at the legs."

"The legs will hold," the other one said. "He's not gonna run away."

The old woman was kneeling beside the corpse. She had buried her face in her hands and was sobbing incessantly. Her plaited grey hair had become completely dishevelled and hung down to

the ground. The crowd was chattering away; some people who could barely stand up any more and who were beginning to feel worn out from all this talking, emitted hoarse noises every so often.

"Funny that so many people should come and watch," Ranek said, "as though they'd never seen this before."

"It's always like that . . . a little spectacle."

"I believe they're having fun watching the old woman."

"They're right, she's making too much of a fuss."

"She's the dead man's mother!" Ranek said.

Sigi said, "So what!" Then he laughed.

Now they could see one of the bearers amble over to a second corpse—the little blond man whom Ranek and Rosenberg had flung out the window last night. The corpse lay on his back staring up at the window. He had lain like that the entire night.

The bearer loaded the corpse like a sack of flour onto his broad shoulders and came back to the fence. Sigi nudged Ranek and pointed a man in the crowd out to him who bore deceptive resemblance to this second corpse.

Ranek was startled.

"That's Seidel," said Sigi, "his brother."

"Rosenberg told me Seidel let his brother starve to death even though he had some money."

"That's true," said Sigi, "but you can't hold that against him. Seidel has three sons to feed. A brother isn't that important nowadays."

"You're right," said Ranek.

"Isn't that important," Sigi repeated, "and still, Seidel is decent enough to pay for the burial. The bearers cost a good bit of hard cash. But he owes that to his brother."

Ranek nodded. "It's a waste of money anyway. The city hearse"—he corrected himself—"the big cart, would have taken the two for nothing."

"The big cart doesn't pass by here every day," said Sigi.

Ranek thought of something else. "Why is Seidel also paying for Levy?"

"You're wrong. Seidel's paying just for his brother."

"And who raised the money for Levy?"

"His mother. Who else?"

"She has nothing."

"No, nothing."

"Explain."

Sigi scratched himself with embarrassment. Then he pointed to the bushes behind the house. "I was there when the old woman negotiated with the bearers," Sigi said. "Not only me, most of the people who are here now were there. The old woman said she couldn't pay. The bearers said, 'Either you pay or you go with us behind the bushes.' The old woman said, 'Into the bushes, then . . .' We all went along. The bearers gave her a good screwing. The old woman screeched like a pig but she stuck it out to the end." Sigi slapped himself on his stomach; it was supposed to be funny; however, his face remained serious. "The old woman didn't want her son to lie around here for days," he said slowly. "She wanted to do one more thing for him."

Now they saw how the little blond man was loaded right on top of Levy. Levy's head slipped a little to the side. The blond fellow's small hand plopped into Levy's face. The crowd broke out in laughter. The old woman was still moaning and did not want to get up, even though the bearers were kicking her and calling out to her to make room for them.

A man who had the face of a bulldog stood in front of Ranek and was rolling himself a cigarette. He turned around now and asked, "Do you have a light?"

Ranek knew who he was. He lived in Dvorsky's cellar.

Ranek gave him a light.

"If you permit, I would like to introduce myself," the man said. "My name is Sami."

"We know each other," Ranek said.

"I don't recollect," the man said.

"It doesn't matter," Ranek said.

The man eyed Ranek's hat, then his face, and shook his head. "Usually I remember everyone I meet. But perhaps you've changed."

Then he became suddenly jolly. "Did you see that before? The

two corpses . . . the way the blond one's hand plopped in the other one's face?"

Ranek made no reply. He did not feel well and therefore he rolled himself a cigarette.

"Did you know him?" the man asked.

"Who?" Ranek asked reluctantly.

"The blond one?"

"Vaguely."

"And the other one, the one underneath?"

"Vaguely," Ranek said again.

* * *

Pitching comfortably the bier disappeared down the street. It was a long and arduous trip to the mass graves. The bearers took their time. They stopped frequently along the way and stuffed their pipes, rested a while, and then continued on.

The crowd at the fence dispersed gradually. No one felt obligated to accompany the dead man on his last journey—this custom had long since become superfluous. Seidel, who had missed lunch, went back to the room to boil some potatoes for himself and his boys. The old woman tottered to the latrine to clean herself. Only Sigi stared after the bier a while longer.

Just when he was about to go back inside, he saw Ranek slip onto the street. Ranek seemed in a hurry.

Sigi climbed after him. "Where are you off to?" he asked.

"To the coffeehouse." Ranek shuffled his feet undecidedly back and forth. He regretted what he'd just said.

"You mean Lupu's coffeehouse in the Pushkinskaja?"

Ranek nodded.

"You pulled the pot out from under my nose," Sigi said accusingly. "That was a rotten trick, I wouldn't have thought you would do something like that." Sigi blinked his eyes. "We'll be quits if you buy me a coffee."

"Drink water," Ranek said angrily. "That'll do you more good."

"The coffee at Lupu's isn't expensive," Sigi panted. "It's not real coffee . . . and I just want one . . . just one cup."

Sigi looked at him imploringly.

Ranek's face had become icy. "Just one," Sigi repeated. "Perhaps I'll be able to do something for you someday." Sigi's voice broke: "You know . . . I can . . . I can do something for people occasionally."

"You're mistaken if you think I'll let you exploit me," Ranek said. "I'm not that type."

Sigi became unsure. "I know," he said. "I didn't mean it that way. I tried my luck, that's all."

Ranek's features suddenly relaxed. He inspected Sigi disdainfully from head to toe. A sad sack, he thought, he's much worse off than yourself.

"All right, come along," Ranek said suddenly.

"Thanks," said Sigi, "you're a good man."

"Of course I won't be able to pay for our drinks," said Ranek, "neither for yours nor for mine. I'm cleaned out."

"Credit?" Sigi inquired.

Ranek shook his head. "I've no credit anywhere."

"Ask for a handout, eh?"

"Handout is an ugly word," Ranek said, grinning. "I'm not a man who asks for handouts. Have a few acquaintances in the coffeehouse, a few friendly people, you understand, who are just waiting to treat me to a cup of coffee."

"You're joking."

"What do you mean! I'm completely serious."

"Fine, if your acquaintances invite you—how do I come in?"

"That I don't know."

"Do you think they'll invite me?"

"I'll leave some in the cup for you if they don't."

"Fine," Sigi said, "I have your word."

They were walking along the area that adjoined the old railway station. The street ran straight ahead, without interruption. Here and there were large holes in the road which they had to skirt. This was nothing unusual; there had been no landslide; it had only been the bombs that had torn the large, crater-like holes into the street. At a distance they could see the bier with the two corpses as it turned off into a side street. They did not follow it. They stayed on the main road.

The sky had cleared completely. The weak sun made the mud glisten in many colours. After they had trotted alongside one another for about a quarter of an hour they left the street to take a short cut. They walked across the expanse of ruins and rubble. They could not see very far ahead of them because heaps of rubble and jagged, half-destroyed walls blocked their sight, but they knew they were close to the centre of town—they heard the muffled uproar that came from the Bazaar and the Pushkinskaja; it rose up behind the ruins and was like a signpost in this desert of stone.

8

A section of what had formerly been the main street of Prokov ran diagonally through the ghetto, but no one knew exactly where this street was now since it had been bombed so badly it was no longer recognizable and lay buried somewhere in the expanse of ruins. All traffic now flowed through the Pushkinskaja. The Pushkinskaja lay close to the river; that was why people also called it "River Street," a misleading designation, of course, especially for newcomers, since there were other streets in the ghetto that touched the irregular and frequently turning river-bank at some point or other.

Most of the houses on the Pushkinskaja had been left intact. Rusty signs in Cyrillic script still hung above shop doors which had once been owned by Ukrainians, but no one wanted to take the signs away even though their original meaning was no longer appropriate. What had once been an ironware shop whose contents had been confiscated by the Rumanian authorities now contained a bakery in whose window suspicious-looking, dark loaves made of bran and sawdust were on display. Next to the bakery was the lumberyard where you could buy tree stumps and,

at a slightly higher price, the same stumps chopped into firewood.

There also was the sack dealer who sold empty flour sacks, sacks as wrap-arounds for the poor, sacks for the wealthy to stow away their food in. The undertaker's agency was also nearby in a misshapen little house, and a little farther on there was the barbershop. Opposite the barbershop was the brothel. And finally, at the very end of the street was Itzig Lupu's coffeehouse.

An odd street. Whereas the greater part of the city consisted of ruins, the pulse beat of life continued unhampered on the Pushkinskaja. Some people had left their quiet, desolate streets for no other reason but to hear the familiar noises of a busy street, noises that had not been entirely forgotten and that recalled certain fond memories. Some people also came for other reasons: because the street had a name, for where there were symbols there was still hope. So the war had not expunged all individuality after all.

The Pushkinskaja originated at the Bazaar. The Bazaar provided the impetus that kept the traffic flowing busily along the street throughout the day. The Bazaar was a colourful, crowded playground. Here people sold old clothes, foot rags, and shoes, pots and pans, gilded wedding bands, and the gold teeth of the dead. People who liked to have something to nibble on to while away their time could buy cornflower and melon seeds here. If you wanted a quick bite you went to "blackbeard," a giant in rags whose beard had become proverbial. No matter what the weather you would always find him at the same location: at the exit of the Bazaar, the corner of Pushkinskaja. There he would stand behind a mobile stove and offer the people "hot knishes," the crisp, fake potato pancakes made of ersatz flour, potato peels, and other refuse which smelled tempting but which you had to eat slowly on an empty stomach if you did not want to vomit again at once. Blackbeard had a loud, vigorous voice, and you could hear him hawking his goods from far off: "Hot knishes . . . hot knishes . . . hot . . . hot . . . hot."

People did not receive food coupons in the Prokov ghetto. In the Bazaar if you kept your eyes open you could find among the

old clothes and bed sheets on the stalls a few hidden potatoes or beets, sometimes also a few beans, a little corn, millet, dark flour, and other foodstuffs that had filtered through the blockade, filtered through at the cost of very high bribes and were resold here for exorbitant prices. A few Ukrainian peasants who had passes and were allowed to enter the ghetto occasionally brought corn and food with them and sold it in exchange for jewellery or clothes. Food in larger quantities and delicacies such as butter, milk, eggs, and meat could occasionally be obtained on the black market; the black market dealers could usually be found in an out-of-the-way part of the Bazaar—and in certain houses on the Pushkinskaja : at the barbershop, the brothel, in the coffeehouse.

The two men had reached the Bazaar. Sigi did not want to go any farther but Ranek pulled him along. "Come on," he said.

"Perhaps there's something we can steal?" Sigi whispered.

"Not now," Ranek said. "Too many police. It's too risky."

"We'll come back later on, eh?" Sigi asked.

"Yes," Ranek said, "Come, let's go."

They walked across the wide plaza, but because so many people were standing around the stalls they had difficulty in getting through. Some people looked well fed and were warmly dressed, but the majority had grey, grief-stricken faces; these were people like them, the poor, the beggars, the refuse eaters who rendezvoused here every day. They also saw a few corpses lying in the mud, their rigid faces defiled by the earth and trampled flat by the many feet.

They reached the exit and turned into the Pushkinskaja. Since they knew that they would only be delayed if they walked past the bakery—they could not possibly help looking at the loaves in the shop window—they crossed right now and walked on along the other side of the street.

Two whores stepped out of the brothel. One was radiating good health and was as fat as a balloon, the other, however, was haggard and had a weary, tortured face. Looking at the second one, you realized that she had known hunger and deprivation and had not been at her job very long since making the saving leap. When the two passed Ranek and Sigi, the haggard one

suddenly stopped. "Ranek . . ." she whispered, "... Ranek!" He lifted his head. "Betty!" he exclaimed, startled.

The fat girl quickly pulled her companion away. "Who's that tramp?" she hissed. "You know him?" The girl nodded. Her haggard face was heavily rouged. They walked on hurriedly.

Sigi and Ranek fell back behind the two whores. "I used to know her," Ranek said, "used to work in the same place she did. . . . I didn't know she was a hooker now."

"She's no hooker," Sigi grinned. "She's got a steady job. Didn't you see her come out of the brothel?"

"Shut up!" Ranek said coldly. He was not in a joking mood. They followed the two girls without really intending to—the whores evidently had the same destination: Itzig Lupu's coffee-house.



Now, in the afternoon, traffic was particularly heavy on the Pushkinskaja. The first empty carts started returning from the cemetery and made one more round along the street before driving home. People with pushcarts and wagons and vehicles drawn by little *panje* horses, and occasionally even a truck came from the direction of the Bazaar and the side streets that led from the new railway station to the bridge. Anyone who wanted to cross the road at this hour had to be careful. The only ones who did not have to pay attention to the traffic, letting it roll over them without emitting a sound, were the corpses that lay about here as everywhere.

An old man with a violin was standing in front of the sack shop. A curious circle had formed around him. The old man was playing something or other. After a while he put away his violin and took his hat off. He held it clenched in his outstretched hand.

Someone stepped out of the crowd and spat into the hat. Loud guffaws. The old man wiped the inside of his hat clean without saying a word, put it back on, squeezed the violin under his arm, and pushed off.

"What was that he played?" a woman in the crowd asked her

husband. The woman was carrying a baby on her back and the baby was screeching.

"I don't know what he played," the man said. "It wasn't Rumanian, it wasn't Yiddish, either."

"And it wasn't Ukrainian," the woman said, "and it wasn't Russian because we would have recognized it if it had been Russian."

"It was rot," the man said, "like all music. He didn't even earn a single rouble with it, not a one."

"That's true," the woman said, "he didn't earn anything with it." The woman now walked to the edge of the sidewalk and took the child down from her back. She held it over the gutter. The man followed her. "Again?" he asked.

"The child's screeching so," the woman said, "I think it has to piss."

"You notice everything too late," the man said. "It pissed long ago."

He laughed while the woman stowed the child on her back.

"Well, what do you know!" he said suddenly. "There he is again, the old fellow with the violin!" He stepped up to the musician. "Why are you coming back here? They'll just spit in your hat again."

"I wanted to cross the street," the old man said, "but I can't, I can't see very well any more."

"And that's why you came back?"

"Can't someone help me? Help me get across the street?"

"Where do you want to go?"

"To the brothel."

"Do you want to serenade them?"

"Yes . . . in front of the door."

"Those over there . . . probably have more appreciation for music?"

"Yes . . . I think so. Could you help me across the street now?"

"Why are you talking so much with him?" the woman scolded. "Let him go by himself!"

"Will you?" the old man asked again.

"No," the man said. "Don't you see . . . my wife . . . doesn't want

to . . . she's angry because the child has pissed."

While the old man kept looking for someone to help him across the street, a man who was smoking a pipe stepped out of the brothel at the other end of the street: it was the doorman. He was notorious for chasing beggars and loiterers from his doorstep.

He was a stockily built man with a pockmarked face and sleepy eyes. His movements were both languid and cautious; while he stood for hours on guard, bowlegged, with measured calm in front of his entrance, the pipe between his lips was usually the only thing that moved. He gave the impression of being an old, pensioned sea dog rather than the doorman of the most notorious house in Prokov. Anyone who knew him intimately, however, was aware that his apparent apathy was only dissembling; in fact, he watched like a hawk and nothing that happened within the vicinity of the brothel escaped him.

The doorman now took up an imperious position on the threshold and looked intently in the direction in which the two whores had disappeared. Gone they are, he thought discontentedly, can't even see them any more, probably already at the coffeehouse. And you'd made a point of telling the fat one to wait. Because of the fellow coming to see her at five. Hadn't he said five? Damn it, all hell's going to break loose again when he finds out she isn't here.

The doorman angrily shook his head. At least the skinny one could have stayed behind, he thought. Or, better not? No, better not, he decided. Not her.

Damn it, he thought, what if this turns out badly . . . the business with the skinny one. It was your idea. It was you who recommended her to Madame. And he remembered what he had said to Madame: "You can depend on it, she's got temperament, even if she's half starved now."

"I'll put her on probation for six weeks," Madame had told him. "If she hasn't put on a little weight by then, out she goes. Our clients demand a little fat nowadays; that temperament business isn't important any more. That used to be different, eh?" Madame had winked at him and laughed.

"Well, everybody gets more than enough grub here," he had

replied. "I can guarantee you . . . in five to six weeks . . ."

The flow of the doorman's thoughts was now interrupted. Well, now what's the matter, he thought, police? Why is everybody running like that? A roundup? Nonsense. Nothing ever happens here this early in the afternoon. They're probably chasing someone from the black market. . . . Serves him right. He should be more careful. They've got no sense.

* * *

In the barbershop opposite the brothel someone ripped open the door, stuck out his head: the barber, who was a queer. He had seen the police run past his window and he wanted to know what was going on.

The doorman waved to him.

The barber came hesitantly across the street. As he walked he seemed to perform a kind of dance-skip, not very different from the whores who paraded about here, twitching their behinds conceitedly back and forth. He was a delicate man of about forty. People said he had a certain shyness about him, a manner that middle-aged women are particularly fond of; even though he didn't care for women. But that was the way it was. Yes, the doorman thought, he's awfully well-mannered, no doubt about it, but you still can't trust him for a second.

The barber had lascivious eyes and his high falsetto voice reminded you somehow of honey. His hair was thinning and was coloured a dull rust brown. It was parted in the middle and the parting was as neat as if it had been applied with a ruler.

"Do you know why everybody is running like this?" the doorman asked, his eyes fixed pensively on the barber's hips.

"No idea."

"Razzias?"

"Definitely not. Or you wouldn't see me here."

"Yes . . . yes."

"And all the people on the street just stand there and stare. There, take a look!" the barber suddenly said. "The police are running towards the bakery."

"Yes, now I see them too."

"Probably there's trouble at the baker's."

"That's possible."

"The last time the people broke down the window where the black bread is on display. Probably's the same thing this time." The barber sighed. "I warned the baker only last week. I told him : if he locks the shop he ought to take the bread out of the window. Who'd leave bread unguarded? You'd be crazy."

"Certainly," the doorman said. "The baker is an idiot. There are people who never learn."

The doorman yawned. He sucked phlegmatically at his pipe and blew the smoke into the barber's face. The barber coughed, turned away his head, and wiped his eyes.

"Smoke doesn't agree with you, does it?" the doorman said, beaming at him.

"Not if you blow it into my eyes," said the barber. He smiled weakly. "But don't worry about it—you didn't do it on purpose."

The barber was positive the doorman had done it on purpose, but he couldn't tell the roughneck off. Under no circumstance could he offend him—the doorman was a man with connections; he was on intimate terms with the police who visited the whorehouse every day. You had to watch your step with him.

"I've got to go back to the shop now," the barber said. "There are still a few customers . . . I can't stay away too long."

"Don't let me keep you," said the doorman. Then he asked : "Do you think it's time for me to have my hair cut?"

"No," said the barber. "Your hair isn't long enough yet."

"I'll come over to your place later on anyway," the doorman said, grinning.

"But I'm telling you . . . your hair isn't—"

"That doesn't matter," the doorman interrupted, still grinning, "I want to have my head shaved; it's getting warm outside."

"Fine, come over then," said the barber unenthusiastically.

"I get it for free, don't I?"

"But of course," said the barber, and he thought, if you tell the fellow not to come, then he might just stick the police on you.

"Yes, do come over," he said submissively. "I'll shave your head for nothing."

* * *

The coffeehouse—a large smoke-filled room with crudely constructed tables and chairs, a filthy counter, and a red-hot round stove—seemed more like a smelly Russian dive. The owner insisted that before the war the coffeehouse had indeed been a bar in which people had drunk vodka out of thick water glasses. When Itzig Lupu took over the place—shortly after the fall of the city of Prokov—there was no more vodka to be had; therefore, he rechristened it. The name "Coffeehouse" was an invention of which Itzig was particularly proud.

The coffeehouse was always crowded. The majority of its guests were black market dealers, whores, pimps, and occasional thieves. Every so often there also came off-duty police, soldiers, and Rumanian officials; they received everything free of charge and for this reason they generally behaved themselves. However, one could also meet up with pitiful creatures whom Itzig Lupu disdainfully called "vermin"; the only reason they came to the place was because it was always well heated. Usually they stood around the stove warming their hands or roasting soybeans on the top of it. As soon as the owner cast his eyes on them they shied back into another corner. Occasionally one of the walking dead would stagger in from the street, take one look around with his empty eyes, and stagger back out.

With the curfew the coffeehouse was transformed into a hotel. The hotel idea was not Itzig Lupu's, but his wife's. It was a good source of income, frequently better than the ersatz coffee, which tasted of bile. All sorts of people came together here after seven in the evening. For some it was only a temporary lodging, others slept here on a permanent basis. They paid Itzig Lupu with foodstuffs, but also in cash.

After the last guests had left the coffeehouse, the chairs and tables were pushed together and the fire in the stove extinguished. A few people, whose rent was in arrears, swept for Itzig and sprinkled sawdust onto the smeary floor. The transformation did

not take long. When everything had been prepared for the night, Itzig stepped outside and gave the people waiting there a sign to come in. He gave this sign with a police whistle. Usually he whistled three times, which meant: the coffeehouse is closed . . . the hotel is open . . . you poor slobs can come in now.

Itzig Lupu and his wife slept behind the counter. The two of them were the last to go to bed and in the morning they were up before any of the others: to awaken the people sleeping on and under the tables by shaking, cursing and scolding them to chase them promptly outside—the room had to be empty before the first day-guests arrived to have coffee.

* * *

Sigi called Ranek's attention to the crowd lounging about in front of the coffeehouse. He had noticed the crowd from afar, but now as they came closer he became ill at ease. "Look, that mob, they're making faces as if they wanted to eat us up."

"They're completely harmless," Ranek said.

"But they're blocking the door!"

"It just looks like that."

"Who are they?"

"They sleep inside during the night. You've heard of Lupu's hotel, you must have."

"I've heard."

"Lupu doesn't let any of them inside in daytime. It's a matter of principle. He's probably afraid they'll just sit around and not eat anything only because they sleep in his place and therefore feel they have some kind of right. Most of the people have no idea where to go during the day and they simply wait outside until their time comes."

Sigi stayed close to Ranek while they wound their way through the embittered crowd. He thought to himself, Something's going to happen, I'm sure, something will happen; they hate everyone who comes in here. But Ranek had been right. They passed through the crowd without incident.

They were lucky. They found an empty table near one of the filthy windows.

"At least it's warm here," said Sigi, who leaned back comfortably in the wobbly chair, "really pleasant. I will . . . I think I will come here more often."

Ranek rolled himself a cigarette. "Do you have a match?"

Sigi shook his head. "I'll come here more often," he repeated.

"Damn it," Ranek said, "why do I always have to run out of matches." He rummaged angrily in his pockets. Then he stood up and went to the stove.

In the meantime Sigi inspected the room with real interest. Several men with icy, expressionless faces were playing poker at the table next to theirs; at other tables people were talking, negotiating, trading currencies. Sigi also noticed ragged figures by the stove who seemed to be cooking something and kept glancing anxiously toward the counter. Sigi didn't know who these people were, all he knew was that they were not part of the regular clientele, and suddenly he realized that he and Ranek fitted as badly into the place as the ragged figures by the stove.

Sigi thought Ranek would return at once, but Ranek obviously had something else in mind. Astonished, Sigi now saw Ranek walk over to the counter where two prostitutes were standing. Ranek talked to the skinny one for some time. She's wiping her eyes, Sigi thought; how touching. What did he tell her? Watch out, he thought, another minute and Ranek will burst into tears too. He was shaking, he was laughing so hard.

When Ranek returned to the table, Sigi said, "Why d'you have to gab so long with that whore?"

"I told her a story," snickered Ranek.

"A sob story, wasn't it?"

"Of course, that's always effective."

"You mean with whores?" Sigi laughed again. "How'd she react?"

"She promised to give me some grub."

"What do you know," Sigi groaned, "what a lucky fellow!"

"The whorehouse has a fabulous kitchen, she told me. You can get anything you want there, even meat. Drop by some time, she said."

"That's something," said Sigi, "that's quite something."

"Betty is a good girl."

"Betty? I ought to write down that name."

"Go ahead. Won't do you any good though. She didn't invite you."

"I know," laughed Sigi, "but I should note down that name anyway, because she's such an angel, such a real angel of a whore."

"It's a pity you don't have a pencil," said Ranek mockingly. "And even if you had one you'd first have to learn to write."

"I can write," said Sigi. "I haven't forgotten how." He scribbled pensively with his finger on the dusty table top, drawing a capital B. "You really want to go to the whorehouse?"

"Of course."

"You know, you'll just make trouble for her. Why didn't you ask her to bring your grub down to you, I mean, instead of going upstairs."

"I know That'd be better. But I don't want to bother her with that. You should never ask for too much. That way you get nothing in the end. You know how it is!"

"Perhaps you're right. Then go to her if that's what she wants."

Sigi again looked with fascination at the counter. Suddenly he said, "Something's going on. Look at that fellow there!" Sigi pointed to a man at the end of the counter who was wearing the arm band of the Jewish police. The man was strikingly well dressed: a velvet jacket, sports shirt, riding kit, and carefully polished brown motorcycle boots. A short wooden night stick dangled from his hip. The man was talking to the innkeeper's wife.

"That's Daniel," smiled Ranek. "He comes here often . . . when he's off duty."

"Daniel," Sigi said thoughtfully, as if trying to recollect something.

"There's no need to get worried about him," said Ranek. "Off-duty police are harmless. They're all the same: at night they hunt men and during the day they're as gentle as lambs and glad to be free of the dirty business for a while."

"Where do you know him from?"

"We went to school together. We even call each other by our first names."

"Even now?"

"Yes, even now."

Ranek smoked pensively. For a time he held his hand in front of his face and blew smoke playfully between his fingers. "Some time ago," Ranek said slowly, "they came into the place where I was living and made a selection. Daniel was one of them. He let me go."

"That can happen," said Sigi. "He had a weak moment; the next time he'll get even with you and won't let you go."

"He promised me that I wouldn't have to be afraid as long as he's with them. He'll always protect me."

"And you believe him?"

"Yes."

"Then he seems to have a soft spot for you, like that whore."

"He remembers the past when he sees me. That makes him soft."

"I can understand it in the whore's case. But with a policeman?"

"But don't you see—they're alike. It wouldn't make sense otherwise." Ranek shook his head and laughed softly to himself. Sigi stared without expression at Ranek's cigarette.

"You want to finish it?" asked Ranek.

"Yes. Are you feeling sick?"

"No. But I've had enough. Take it."

Sigi squinted in Daniel's direction. "Do you remember the time when the roundups were conducted exclusively by Ukrainian and Rumanian militiamen?"

"Yes. I was here then."

"You too? One of the very first, eh?"

"Yes."

Sigi thoughtfully stroked his shaved head with his thin hands. "Who would have thought then that we'd have Jewish police in Prokov?"

"No one."

"That's right. No one would have thought of anything that crazy."

Ranek nodded indifferently.

"And yet," Sigi continued volubly, "it isn't even that crazy. The authorities aren't completely stupid. The idea to have Jewish police is actually brilliant. It works in the other ghettos, the ones the Germans supervise. So why shouldn't it work here? The Rumanians learned a lot from the Germans. They know that the existence of a Jewish police force lends the roundups, lends them, as they say, a semblance of legality. Makes sense, doesn't it? If Jews hunt Jews, then it must be right. Why do you need us? You can clean your pigsty yourselves."

"The Jewish police aren't doing it by themselves," Ranek said.

"For the time time being. But that'll stop as soon as the Jewish police prove that they can handle the job by themselves."

"Maybe," Ranek said, bored. He wasn't interested in this conversation. What Sigi said was no news to him. He just repeated what you heard at every street corner where people stood and talked.

"Did Daniel help you any other time? I mean, did he ever give you something to eat?" Sigi asked out of curiosity, without anything at the back of his mind. But suddenly he noticed that Ranek's bored face became taut again. Something's wrong there, thought Sigi. Why is he suddenly so restless? Why is he fidgeting with his hat? He repeated his question: "Did he ever give you something to eat?"

"No," said Ranek. "Daniel tried to assist me in another way."

"Did he offer you money?"

Ranek shook his head. "He offered me a position."

Sigi listened tensely.

"It's quite a while back," said Ranek, "at the time that you could get a place for free here in the ghetto. You can remember that, can't you?"

"Yes, damn it," said Sigi. "Go on."

"Daniel proposed I join the police force."

"Daniel proposed—"

"Yes, that's what he proposed." Ranek interrupted the aston-

ished Sigi. "That sounds a little odd. But that's what happened. He was serious at the time. He wanted to do everything for me : papers, formalities and all the other nonsense. All I had to say was 'yes' . . . one word, 'yes' . . . and I would be safe until the end of the war : good food, decent cigarettes, warm clothes." Ranek grinned significantly : "D'you ever see the I.D. the police carry with them? I'd have had an I.D. like that . . . with all those stamp marks, all kinds of stamp marks . . . would have always had it in my pocket. That's very important, you know, an I.D. like that confirms that you are a useful member of human society and therefore have the right to live. You became untouchable. None of those bastards can do anything to you any more. An I.D. like that is worth something all right."

"And what did you do?"

"I didn't accept. I told him no."

"That was a big mistake." Sigi looked at him without comprehension. "That was certainly the biggest mistake you made in your entire life."

"At that time I was still a pretty tough fellow," said Ranek, "as they say . . . sturdy. Daniel thought a lot of me."

"Now they wouldn't accept you any more in the police force," Sigi said, shaking his head, "not even if you wanted to. You look much too weak."

"Yes, I know. But that doesn't change my decision. Even if I still had my strength I wouldn't volunteer for the police force . . . We don't all have the gift."

"You'd pick it up quickly."

"No," said Ranek, "not that." Ranek smiled imperceptibly. "I've swung a few pretty rough deals in my time. Pretty crooked or rotten—take your pick. My slate isn't exactly clean. But I haven't murdered anyone yet."

"You don't have to kill anyone as a policeman," said Sigi. "You just drag the people to the station. The fact that they're shot later on, it doesn't concern you."

"It's the same," said Ranek, "it's murder. You know that just as well as I."

"Fine, I know it just as well as you . . . you're right, but it's all

the same anyway." Sigi's eyes began to flicker, they suddenly grew larger, almost round. "If you're in our situation," he said harshly, "you've not much choice. You'll take any kind of work so long as you get some grub for it, and perhaps some warm clothes and a few scraps of paper that keep you from getting deported. You no longer give a damn whether you dirty your hands or get blood on them; you'll do anything and you won't ask any questions. And you're no exception, or are you?"

Ranek clenched his teeth. You can't convince him anyway, he thought, it's no use.

"You don't believe me?"

"No. You're no exception. You won't stop at anything."

"You seem to know me very well."

"I know who's an exception and who isn't. You're not, that's for sure." Sigi's voice became even more derisive. "The thing with the police probably just didn't work out. You're not the type who'll let a chance like that slip by. It didn't work out and you won't admit it."

"Believe what you want."

"You know," said Sigi, "I can always read people."

"Never thought you had it in you," Ranek said bitingly.

"All I have to do is take one look at a man and I know who he is."

"Why, I'm flabbergasted."

"When you came stumbling in last night I knew immediately what was the matter with you."

"Well what?"

"That guy's got the stuff it takes, I said to myself, he won't stop at anything."

Sigi chewed pleasurably at the dead cigarette butt. Ranek stared at the empty table. Sigi opened his jacket and proceeded to scratch himself. He continued doing this for some time, lost in thought.

A little while later he carefully nudged Ranek under the table. "Someone's coming towards our table, a fellow with an apron on his stomach. Is that the owner?"

Ranek turned his head. "Yes. That's him."

Sigi, who knew Itzig Lupu only by name, now saw him for the first time in the flesh. He had not imagined that Itzig Lupu would be so small. A small man with a large head, he thought, amused. His face was a broad, fleshy mass of suspicion. Two prominent front teeth protruded over the lower lip and lent his mouth a rodent-like quality. Itzig Lupu moved suspiciously around their table as though he first wanted to make sure he knew with whom he was dealing. Then he stopped brusquely in front of Ranek. "Coffee?"

"Coffee," Ranek said, "but please, not that synthetic stuff."

"We only have ersatz," Itzig Lupu replied, nettled.

"All right, ersatz then, of course with sugar."

"No sugar."

"Fine," Ranek said magnanimously, "then without sugar. But hot!"

Itzig Lupu didn't move an inch. His eyes twitched nervously. He kept looking from Ranek to Sigi. Ranek knew exactly what he was waiting for, but pretended not to. Itzig Lupu gave the table a few swipes with the corner of his dirty apron. Suddenly he said, "Payment in advance."

"But since when?" Ranek said innocently.

"It's a house rule."

"That's not the case. This isn't the first time I've been here. Most people pay afterwards."

"If you know your way around so well," sputtered Itzig Lupu, "then you listen to me. Most people pay afterwards, but some have to pay in advance. I'm the one who gives the orders around here."

"You don't trust me, do you? Perhaps... because I'm not wearing a silk tie?"

"He owns a silk tie," Sigi intervened, laughing, "but he left it at home because he doesn't have a shirt to go with it. And it doesn't look so good when you wrap a tie round your bare neck." Sigi spat out the butt and gave Itzig Lupu a toothless grin.

"Just wait a moment," Ranek said brusquely. Ranek got up and walked to the counter. Sigi saw him talking to Daniel. Daniel gave Itzig Lupu an unmistakable sign.

Ranek came back. "Bring us two demis," said Ranek, "at Daniel's expense."

"Daniel always gets his coffee for nothing here," Itzig Lupu said hesitantly.

"I'm sure he'll pay this time," Ranek assured him.

Itzig Lupu twisted his hands in despair. "Daniel wants to invite you at my expense," he complained.

"Daniel doesn't take unfair advantage," Ranek smiled. "He wouldn't do something like that. I'm sure he'll pay."

"Two demis then," Itzig Lupu stammered.

"Do you think Daniel will pay?" asked Sigi after their host had left.

"Perhaps. Daniel has his moods."

"Did you see how scared Lupu got?"

"Yes, he doesn't dare refuse Daniel."

"By the way, what are two demis?"

"One full cup for two people."

"So we'll drink out of the same cup?"

"No," laughed Ranek. "Lupu'll bring a second cup along, an empty one. So that you can pour off half, you understand? It's very simple. That's two demis. Comes out even, doesn't it?"

"Yes, of course."

"He doesn't ask anything for the empty cup. You get it for nothing, you understand? The owner's wife even washes it for you, all for nothing. Wonderful, isn't it? What wonderful things you can find in this world."

"Truly wonderful. Why didn't you ask for two full cups?"

"I told you before that you should never ask for too much."

* * *

Soon Itzig Lupu came back with two cups—the full one and the empty one. Without wasting a word he set them carelessly at the edge of the table and left again.

Ranek shoved the empty cup towards Sigi and filled half of it. Sigi lifted it like a glass of champagne. "To your health!"

Ranek did the same. "To your health!" He added, "Don't burn your trap, drink slowly."

"Slowly," Sigi said, nodding. He took a sip. "It tastes like real coffee," he said with enthusiasm.

"You've forgotten what real coffee tastes like."

"It tastes like real coffee," Sigi insisted.

Ranek suddenly pushed his chair backward and bent down.

"What d'you find?"

"A butt." Ranek picked up the butt and showed it to Sigi.

"*Nationale*," Sigi said, gawking.

"Right. *Nationale*. An old-time brand."

"So good cigarettes still exist?"

"Sure. And also the people who smoke them."

"High-class people," said Sigi.

"Yesterday I found a similar butt . . . on a corpse."

"A high-class corpse," said Sigi.

"Yes, a high-class corpse. The trouble was he'd shit in his pants."

"That doesn't matter. High-class anyway. Had the butt between his lips?"

"No. In his pocket."

"That's a little less high-class already. Begrudged himself the whole cigarette, eh? Saved it, did he?"

"He was economical, that's all," Ranek said, grinning.

Ranek went to the stove again and lighted his butt. He came back. He smoked, enjoyed it while he observed Sigi out of half-closed eyes. Sigi had finished his coffee and now proceeded to lick the cup clean. He had pressed his face into the cup. The muscles of his bony head twitched with the effort. After a time Ranek tapped his knuckles against the twitching head. Sigi looked up angrily.

"Stop that licking," Ranek said. "The owner's watching you."

"Let him look."

"He'll throw you out because he's afraid that you'll break the cup."

"I won't break it."

"Stop anyway."

* * *

Their conversation became more and more excited during the course of the afternoon. They talked, giggling like men who are either slightly drunk or who are playing a role so as to forget their worries.

Once Sigi asked abruptly, "How long did you know Levy?"
"Since yesterday only."

"He had a brother, no?" Sigi asked.

"Yes. The old woman told me."

"Did she also tell you that they knocked him off with an axe?"

"Yes."

Sigi again giggled like a child. "Don't you find it funny that they had to with an axe, of all things. Once, while he was living with us, he stuck a pin into his finger, he groaned the whole night . . . just imagine, all because of a little thing like that."

"The old woman told me he was a dreamer."

"A dreamer, a real dreamer," Sigi said, laughing. "Your corpse with his high-class butt . . . that fellow . . . was an economical type . . . you said, didn't you? an economical type . . . ? Levy was . . . he was a dreamy type. All of them types, he, he—" Sigi suddenly slammed his hand on the table. "What's the matter with you? Why're you so damn serious all of a sudden?"

"I'm not serious. I only think we talk too much rot."

Sigi checked Ranek's expression. "It's true all right," he said, shaking his head, "you're not laughing any longer. Something's troubling you. What is it?"

"Nothing."

"You feel sorry for the old woman?"

"No."

"But why are you suddenly so damned—"

"How did those two treat her? Were they good to her?"

"Yes. They did a lot for their mother."

"Both of them?"

"Yes. I'm telling you . . . both of them . . . the one with the axe . . . and also the other one, the one who croaked in the hallway last night."

"That's all I wanted to know."

"They were good to her. But she wasn't worth it. She didn't

even give the fellow in the hallway something to cover himself up with."

"She didn't have anything to cover him up with."

"Well, yes," said Sigi. "Damn it . . . I didn't think of that."

"You can't cover anyone up if you don't have anything with which to cover. Not even a mother her son."

"Yes," said Sigi, "you're right."

"She did enough for him when he was buried; you told me yourself!"

"The business with the two bearers? Because she let them fuck her so they would take the corpse along?"

"Yes. That's what I mean."

"That was a lot," said Sigi. "I take it back." And now he said to Ranek, "She screamed like a pig. But she stuck it out."

"It was a sacrifice." Ranek said that very softly. Sigi nodded. His eyes met Ranek's. Suddenly he felt cold. The expression in Ranek's eyes, he thought. What's the matter with him?

"A sacrifice," repeated Ranek and he said it as if he would brook no contradiction, "a sacrifice that would do honour to any mother. That was no humiliation. That was a triumph. Every mother in this god-damned world should take the old woman as an example."

"Yes," Sigi said timidly.

Someone came to their table again. It wasn't the owner. It was Daniel. He pulled up a chair.

"Thanks for the coffee," Ranek said.

Daniel made a motion which meant: Don't mention it. For a few seconds he played with his wooden stick, which dangled on his hip; that was only a habit of which he was hardly aware any more, the way some people chew their nails or pick their noses without knowing it—they're surprised if you point it out to them. He let go of the stick again; he smiled, then he folded his well-groomed hands conceitedly over the table edge as if he wanted to put them on display.

"Have you heard anything about Deborah?"

"Deborah is dead," Ranek said, blanching.

"Excuse me . . . stupid question . . ."

Ranek said nothing.

"Stupid question," Daniel repeated, "happens only because sometimes you don't really believe it . . . Deborah is dead? Can you believe that?"

"No. But that doesn't change anything. She is dead."

"I know," Daniel said, shaking his head. For a time he looked pensively in front of himself.

Sigi was still nibbling at his cup. Daniel looked up now. "Who's that?"

"A friend. Sigi's his name."

Sigi smiled with embarrassment. He let go of the cup.

"He nibbles constantly at his cup," Ranek said to Daniel, "and he doesn't even have any teeth left."

"Knocked out," said Sigi.

Daniel nodded sympathetically.

"I've still got the molars left," said Sigi.

Daniel nodded again. "Your teeth, how are they doing?" he asked jokingly, turning to Ranek.

"Not knocked out," said Ranek, "they just fell out."

"Many?"

"No. Just a couple."

"Well, then it's all right."

"I've enough left. But they get worse and worse. I don't know why." Ranek smiled crookedly. "Perhaps because I eat so much chocolate."

"Because you don't clean your teeth," Sigi interjected, snickering. "You didn't have a very good upbringing; that's the reason."

"Don't worry about that," Daniel said absent-mindedly. "There are more important things than teeth in the world." Suddenly he pointed across to the counter. "Who's the woman you were speaking to before? She's new here. Where do you know her from?"

"I'm sure you know her too."

"No."

"She's from Litesty."

"I don't know her. How much?"

"I don't know."

Daniel lighted a cigarette. He stared silently towards the counter. He's acting as if we didn't exist, thought Ranek. Sometimes he behaves very strangely. What's he thinking about now? About the whore? About Litesty? Or is he thinking about Deborah . . . Nonsense. Why of Deborah, of all people? He's looking at Betty, isn't he? Perhaps he wants to screw Betty? Perhaps just because she's from Litesty? Rot. Or is he only thinking that it will be night soon and that the roundups start soon and that he has to go away?

Daniel finished his cigarette. Then he got up, said a curt good-bye, and left.

"Something's not quite right with that one either," said Sigi. "Something's bugging him."

"Something's bugging all of us."

"You think . . . everyone in Prokov?"

"There's something wrong with everyone."

They did not feel like leaving just yet. Neither the cold street nor the sanctuary tempted them. They stayed, killing time. Only when it started to get dark outside, behind the dirty windows, did they get underway.

They looked for butts under the tables. They found a few . . . dirty, stepped on. They picked them up quickly. And then they left the place.

The crowd outside the door was still waiting to be let in. But their time hadn't come yet, there were still a few guests inside and it would probably take quite a while before the coffeehouse became completely empty and Lupu whistled.

In the crowd Ranek noticed a woman whom he knew. She was squatting on the threshold humming a tune to herself. A little child sat on her lap. The child fondled a slack breast which dangled out of her torn blouse. The woman was hunchbacked. Her curly head was stuck right on top of her slim shoulders; it looked as if she had no neck at all. Her legs were excessively long and thin. She reminded you of an ugly grey spider. Now she lifted her head and when she caught sight of Ranek she got up, left the child behind on the threshold, and came up to him.

"Get your arse away from here!" Ranek said.

The woman held her palm out to him. "A few kopecks, please," she begged.

"Kopecks are no longer legal currency," Ranek said.

The woman nodded absent-mindedly. "Then give me a rouble," she said, "... or a few lei ... or a mark."

"Move your arse," Ranek said.

"You had coffee inside. You must have money."

Now Sigi said to the woman, "Kiss his arse."

The woman stared at Sigi with bitter eyes. "Why did you say that? What did I do to you?"

"Get away," Sigi said threateningly, raising his pitiful fists.

"I didn't used to beg," the woman said. "I was better off at one time."

"We were all better off at one time," Sigi said. "Get!"

The woman silently turned her back to them and went back to the child.

As they walked on, Ranek said, "She always begs from me; every time I leave the coffehouse she goes through the same song and dance."

"She must think you have a heart of gold," said Sigi.

* * *

As they passed the whorehouse they suddenly heard gunshots coming from the direction of the Bazaar. They stopped, frightened.

The front door to the whorehouse was open. No one was standing guard; the doorman apparently had sneaked off somewhere. Quickly they stepped inside.

The people on the street started running. The door of the barbershop on the other side was torn open and slammed shut. Somewhere upstairs in the whorehouse a window was opened and they heard a prostitute screaming hysterically.

Soon the guns went silent. Sigi said, "Look how empty the street is now."

"Yes."

"We can't go to the Bazaar now. And we wanted to steal something."

"We'll go tomorrow," Ranek said.

"What do you think? Who'd they shoot at?"

"Don't know."

"Perhaps just in the air, to break up the Bazaar?"

"Perhaps." Suddenly he nudged Sigi. He pointed to the empty street. "Do you see it?"

"Yes."

"Looks like a newspaper."

"No. It's a piece of sack . . . or some kind of rag."

"My eyes are still good," said Ranek stubbornly. "It's a paper."

Newspapers were prohibited in the ghetto, but you could of course buy them on the black market. Usually they were several weeks old. "Stay here!" Sigi said.

No use. Ranek had stepped into the open. Now he walked carefully across the street. Farther up the street—at the corner of the Pushkinskaja—there appeared a Ukrainian militiaman. A few moments later two Rumanian soldiers. They crossed the street. The militiaman disappeared in the direction of the Bazaar, while the soldiers took up position at the corner house. They looked like two statutes; their green uniforms looked grey in the dusk.

They paid no attention to Ranek. Or they hadn't seen him. Ranek picked up the newspaper and slid it under his jacket; then he ambled back just as leisurely.

They could have picked him off, thought Sigi. It isn't worth it for a lousy paper.

Ranek rejoined him. "I was right," he said beaming.

"Now you have something to read again."

"Most of all, I've cigarette paper for a few weeks."

"I need some too. Will you give me a page?"

"Yes, you'll get a page."

"Now?"

"No, at home."

Sigi nodded. "At home," he suddenly said morosely, as if this word had a special meaning.

The street remained quiet. It became dark. They took a circuitous route back to their refuge.

* * *

The others had already lain down to rest. As Ranek sneaked to his place, he noticed Sarah. She was asleep. So she hadn't found another place, he thought, smiling; well, you knew all along she would come back.

9

The everyday routine had begun all over again since he had moved back into the sanctuary. Sometimes he joined its inhabitants when groups of them left the ruin in the morning to go out to search for something edible. Usually they went together, only to spread out later on because everyone wanted to operate according to his own methods. Most of them rummaged through dustbins for leftovers; others, like himself, lounged about the Bazaar, filched something now and then when there was a chance, or made small deals or acted as middlemen. Some set themselves up as beggars on street corners and some went regularly to the soup kitchen.

The soup kitchen was a private institution supported by people who still had sufficient financial reserves and who could afford to cleanse their collective conscience through the distribution of watery millet soup. Ranek detested the soup kitchen. The congestion in front of the soup kettle was so great usually that you had to go home without having accomplished anything at all. Besides, you were always in danger of fainting from having stood in line for so many hours. Therefore, he went only rarely.

There was a death in the sanctuary almost every week. You hardly noticed it any more, since the places that became free were immediately reoccupied by some person who had been homeless.

If the rags that the dead left behind were not completely torn, they inevitably made for a squabble. Everyone felt entitled

to them, and as soon as people noticed a corpse among themselves they set upon him like a herd of wild animals. Here, as everywhere else, only the quickest and nimblest came out on top and could take the clothes with him and convert them into food.

Ranek did not participate in this sport for very long; the competition was too great, the invariable fight with people taxed his strength, and the net result generally was unvented fury.

You have to find yourself a different field of endeavour, he told himself; why don't you try your luck on the streets.

Thus he tried his luck on the streets. He worked like a dog for a few days. He took off early at dawn, strayed about outside, looked in ditches and bushes behind the sanctuary. You could always find corpses there, but they had been cleaned out too; they lay there as naked as God had created them and their rigid, grinning faces seemed to mock him—as if they knew he had come too late.



This evening the room looked somewhat changed. The reason: the card game at the window had stopped. The man who owned the cards was too late coming home one evening and was arrested. The cards, naturally, disappeared with him. The wooden crate, around which the men used to sit, was gone too; it had served as a card table and nothing else; now it had become superfluous. Yesterday it was hacked to bits. Most of it had already been burned, the remainder lay by the kitchen stove and wasn't going to last much longer either.

As was his habit at this hour, Ranek was squatting on his place under the platform. He was smoking. That was the most sensible thing to do. At most he could play twenty-one with Rosenberg; that seemed to be the only game Rosenberg had learned during his entire life; but he played it without cards, only with those damned buttons, and besides, in lousy light. Ranek didn't feel like that. One could also start a conversation with someone, but because practically everyone always talked about the same things it was better to give up all conversations. You had little choice in the evening but to doze. In the evening you felt like a bird

in a cage. Where were the times when one could go out in the evening . . . into a *gemütliche* coffeehouse . . . or to a cinema?

Suddenly he felt afraid again : it was this other fear, the fear of being locked in, of dozing for hours and of going mad from sheer inactivity. . . . And simply so as to occupy his thoughts with something, so that they would not circle emptily around the dangerous dead point, that was why he now proceeded to contemplate the figures lying nearby on the floor.

It was like a game : number one, number two, number three . . .

Number one is not in her place at the moment, the place by the wall he has given to her. Sarah is standing in front of the kitchen stove, cooking. It's beans today, beans which he'd got at at the Bazaar in exchange for two stolen potatoes. All he can see from here are her legs. Occasionally, when she steps a little to the side, he catches a glimpse of the hem of her dress.

The first night she had been only an unfamiliar body, a foreign body in the dark, at his side . . . and when she was gone the next day he didn't even know what her face had looked like. Was she young? Sigi had asked. He had really had no idea.

Now he knew. She was young. But that didn't mean much. You aged quickly here. Now he knew that she had pretty teeth, like pearls . . . which would probably drop out soon because of malnutrition. Her full mouth would crumple then; he could imagine this process with great exactness. Her skin wasn't grey yet. That would happen too.

She had curly, dark blond hair that had been cut short; large, very light, but expressionless eyes. Her face was too regular and gave the impression that she was mindless; but this was a delusion : Sarah was intelligent and had a damned good education, much better than most people in this room. And yet . . . something was lacking. What could it be?

Sometimes he compared Sarah with someone he could remember very clearly : Deborah. Sarah came off badly in this comparison. She appeared empty and unimportant next to Deborah.

He had been feeding Sarah ever since she came back to him. She was fully aware of how little he liked doing this, but she

pretended to be dense. He had refused to take her coat because he did not want to sell her a right to her place. The place was his and it was supposed to remain that way. But even in the beginning he had known he would get everything she possessed eventually . . . not only the woman herself . . . the coat too, and the rest of her things. He would take everything away from her.

That much for place number one. Of course there was more to say about Sarah; after all, she was a human being, someone with thoughts and worries and plans, someone who dreams . . . and even if her face and eyes gave no indication of it . . . something also motivated her, something motivated everyone . . . even the half-dead felt something. But this is all nonsense, you don't want to know more about her anyway.

Place number two is your own; then, to the right, the old woman. The order has not changed.

He was often surprised that the old woman didn't hate him. How was that possible? Because you stuffed some bread in her mouth that evening? Because she felt grateful for that and had forgotten that a complete stranger was lying next to her and not her son.

It was true. He had become his successor. However, the old woman was much too sensible to continue to reproach him for that; someone would have occupied the place in any case! Did the old woman understand this?

He was also fortunate in being only a few years older than her son. Probably that was why the old woman had been showing an entirely different side of herself lately: she worried about him like a mother; sometimes she behaved so oddly, as though she discovered the dead man's features in your face.

Perhaps she has an inkling? No. Or she would treat you differently. She still doesn't know that it was you who stole her son's shoes. She'll never find out. Nor will she find out that her son wasn't quite dead when you did it.

A few days ago she stroked your head. Very tenderly. With a great deal of love. One can feel that. That time you asked yourself again, What does she mean? You or her son?

* * *

Next in line was Axelrad, the businessman. A small, sad-looking man whose legs were swollen and who could walk only with a great deal of effort. He looked like a toad.

The little businessman used to be a multi-millionaire. At least that's what he says. A few million Rumanian lei. That's not chicken feed. He keeps talking about it all the time. *Ach*, he says, I was someone at one time, you know. Three shops on Church Street, two on so and so street, shirts and underwear . . . you know. And the marvellous ten-room apartment with the American bar in the sitting-room. Yes, that was quite a bar . . . I'm telling you . . . classy, really classy.

Frequently he stopped in the middle of a sentence and started to brood.

Ranek couldn't stand him. The little man's unending melancholy and the vapidty of his memories nettled him.

Axelrad had a nickname : Parech.

Parech is a disease of the scalp. The little businessman's skull was the perfect example of it. One could compare his skull to a cornfield ravaged by locusts : everywhere small strands of left-over hair, and in between the corroded, circular holes. It looks ugly and repulsive. But you are loosing your hair too? But differently . . . more evenly.

He remembered : as a boy he used to take walks with his father around the *Ringplatz*. One day an acquaintance came by, politely lifted his hat. When he was out of earshot, his father whispered to him, "Did you see his head? That's a parech." Father laughed. "You know, Rani, people who have parech have to make a pilgrimage to Egypt once a year?"

"No. Why?"

Father laughed again, but he didn't want to say.

Next to the businessman slept his wife. She was a poor imitation of the little toad.

Ranek looked over to her. She noticed it. She made a face at him. Then she turned her head away and took no further notice of him. Her eyes stared monotonously at the spot of light that the lamp cast on the floor under the window.

Then there was another woman. She had a nickname too :

Blood Spitter. She had such a hollow cough. Usually she only spat into her hands, then she wiped her hand on her dress. The dress was full of red spots. No wonder the businessman and wife weren't exactly delighted about their immediate neighbour.

A few days ago the businessman said to his wife, "Why do you keep looking at the yellow spot under the window?"

"I don't know," the woman said.

The businessman sighed. The woman said, "I can't always stare at the wall!"

"The light under the window reminds me of something," the businessman said. "You too?"

"Yes. Sometimes."

"The kerosene lamp. What a weak light it gives. No comparison with the electric lights on the ceiling in our living room, right?"

The woman said nothing else. Instead, the other broke in, the Blood Spitter. She croaked, "Weak light? And I always thought we had a lot of light here. You should see other places."

"Don't always butt into our conversations!" the businessman said, forcing his thin voice to be firm. "You better watch out you don't spit on my wife."

"I picked it up on the floor here. It can happen to anyone. To you too. Or not?"

"Or not, or not," the businessman mimicked her. "Move over a bit. Or move out..As far as I am concerned you can move out. But for God's sake, don't infect my wife!" He added, "Because I'll catch it from her then."

Ranek started counting again : number one, two, three, four, five, six . . .

Number seven and eight were a couple, Mr and Mrs Stein. He hardly knew them except by name, all he knew about them was that they always went to the tin pail at night, first the man, then the woman.

* * *

There was one other person, who, although he did not lie in the

same row with him, lay in his immediate proximity : the man under the kitchen stove.

He hardly ever went out. He slept during the daytime. Towards evening he sometimes left his place under the stove and went into the bushes. He always took a weapon with him, either the poker or a stick; nobody knew what he was up to in the bushes. He was a frightfully powerful man who terrified everyone. Particularly Sarah was afraid of him.

People said he was a killer. They said he ambushed the homeless people who inhabited the bushes, especially women or sick old people who could no longer defend themselves; they said he knocked them down and robbed them of absolutely everything. What if this were true? Probably just rumours. Who knew.

The man under the stove had red hair. His nickname : Red. He was the only one who was not annoyed by his nickname. Axelrad, for instance, became enraged when someone addressed him as "Paroch." Red, however, found his nickname quite natural. Perhaps because he was proud of his hair? Or perhaps because he was glad that no one asked his real name. Perhaps he wanted to forget his name, the name and the past associated with it.

A short while ago Sarah said to Ranek : "I can't stretch out my legs any more."

"Why?"

"Because I'm afraid I might knock against the stove."

"Well, and so what . . . ?"

"Because I don't want to kick Red."

"You're thinking too much again."

"He could—"

"He won't do anything. Don't be afraid."

Anyone setting eyes on Red for the first time felt a shudder run down his spine. The bony, freckled face glowed with hatred. The eyes were bloodshot. When he scratched himself it did not look as natural as when other people did—after all, everyone had lice—in his case one was reminded of an ape. He scratched his broad, hairy chest with dogged fury, his fingers were claws, and he panted and bared his teeth.

Once you knelt down by the stove. You talked to him. You were curious. You wanted to know if he really was such a monster.

You told him a story. You watched him closely. You thought he might reach for a poker at any moment. But he lay there very quietly, listened to you, nodded occasionally, and when you had nothing left to say, he sat up. He said, "Everyone has a story to tell, right?"

You said, "Yes . . . everyone. Did I bore you?"

He just bared his strong teeth. Suddenly he started to laugh. "What does it matter," he said, "whether you bore me or not. Give me a cigarette now."

You hesitated. Then you thought about it and gave him what he wanted.

He didn't thank you. He smoked it quietly. His face again glistened with hatred. Suddenly he reached into his jacket pocket and took out a faded photograph.

"Who's that?"

"Don't you have eyes in your head!"

"Yes, of course."

"A girl . . . can't you see that?"

"Yes."

"My daughter. She's five in the photo."

"An old photo?"

"No, not at all, the picture's got filthy, that's all."

"Let me take a closer look." You inspected it closely. Then you handed it back to Red.

"She had red hair too . . . like myself."

Ranek nodded. Suddenly Red said: "The bastards threw her in the Dniester."

"When? During the crossing?"

"Yes. Threw her in, just like that."

Red talked only about his little girl. He didn't once mention his wife.

* * *

Two fetishes hung from the stovepipe. They were Red's. One

was a long string with three teeth attached to it. Most likely the teeth belonged to someone who was close to Red at one time. Perhaps even to his wife?

The second fetish was a doll. It too hung from a string. The doll's antecedents were less obscure. The doll belonged to the little girl.

He called the doll Mia. A pretty name. Mia had only one eye. Her stomach had a slit in it and the wood shavings were coming out. Still, it wasn't ugly. Which was surprising. Perhaps because the room was so bare and there was not even a single picture on the walls? The doll loaned the room a little warmth. Like the kerosene lamp.

His glance darted across the floor. Most of the people down here were completely unknown to him. They were the nameless ones who had only legs and bodies and heads . . . but no faces. Nameless like the Prokov streets. You noticed them only when you stumbled over them; they were only in your way.

They have no faces, he thought . . . they have no faces.

* * *

The beans weren't ready yet. He thought, Soon . . . they can't take much longer. Be patient a little longer.

He heard Rosenberg laughing above him on the platform. The heads rustled on the smooth wood planks. So the fellow had found someone who'd take a chance and play the idiot's game twenty-one—*nashe-washe, mein-dein*.

A strange bird that Rosenberg. Always finds something to have fun with. He's a man who can contemplate his toes and be amused. Rosenberg still owns a good jacket, custom-made, with a warm lining.

Suddenly it was very loud on the platform. The boards resounded, creaked and groaned. Must be Seidel's boys playing hide-and-seek. They should be broken of that habit.

An unusual game of hide-and-seek. The brats ran around the platform, stepped on people who were dozing, cowered down behind their backs. Seidel should be told about it one of these days.

You can't remember the boys' names. Or can you? The oldest? He has prominent ears. When Seidel speaks about his son, he says, "My oldest, the one with the floppy ears."

Now it starts. Somebody curses. It's Sigi. There's a scream. Probably he hit one of the boys.

The noise increased. Sigi and Seidel swore at each other. The boy was bawling. More blows. It sounded different this time: more like fisticuffs. Panting. You can hear it clearly: two men are wrestling with each other. No doubt about it.

Then somebody plunged over the edge of the platform and just lay there near the stove, pulled himself up eventually and leaned against the door, exhausted: Seidel. His face was ashen. Again Ranek was struck by how closely Seidel resembled his dead brother... the one who starved to death on Seidel's account. And for moments Ranek remembered how they tossed the brother through the window that night... the cold draught... then the smack as the body fell into the yard.

IO

Rosenberg had been nabbed.

He had gone out on the street in the middle of the night because he could no longer stand it in the room. He simply ran out. It's unbelievable. How could a man with such a good sense of humour lose his head just like that and go crazy? He even left his jacket behind on the platform.

Sigi, whose place was close to Rosenberg's, and who was the first to notice the incident, immediately put on the jacket. Sigi was so overjoyed because of the jacket he had picked up that he clambered down off the platform to tell Ranek about the place that had become free.

As Sigi tottered through the dark room, he had second thoughts: Ranek not only had his eye on the place on the dry

platform, he was just as sharp on the jacket. If he woke him up now, Ranek would demand the jacket. It would just make for bad blood. One couldn't trust Ranek. And what if Ranek took him by surprise and took the jacket away from him.

Sigi lay back down. At dawn he quietly left the room. At first he made sure that the situation was clear and the police out of sight; then he went cautiously downstairs.

Shortly afterwards he disappeared in the bushes behind the ruin. He shook one of the homeless ones who were bedded down there and sold him the secret about the free place for a hunk of old meat.

* * *

After Ranek had tied Sarah's clothes up into one bundle he marched off to the Bazaar. Ranek had left her only the most necessary things. He had even taken her shoes from her because he thought it would be better to sell them now while they would still fetch a good price.

At first Sarah had refused to give him her things and had fought him tooth and nail when he undressed her, but then, after he had talked to her nicely and promised her that he'd split the proceeds fairly, she had given in. Perhaps she had also realized that there wasn't much sense in resisting him.

He spent the entire day at the Bazaar. Not until evening did he succeed in finding the right customer. The man paid in cash.

When he had finally got rid of the things and had the money in his pocket it was too late to buy large quantities of food. That had to be put off to the next day. Therefore, he only went to the bakery.

The shop was closed already. He tried the back entrance. The baker opened up. He grumbled a little but finally sold him two loaves made of ersatz flour.

* * *

Sarah had been expecting him impatiently.

"Why did you bring only two loaves?"

"We'll buy more tomorrow. Also flour."

"Fine." She lowered her voice. "Where's the money?"

"In my pocket," he whispered, "Where else?" He turned around anxiously.

"No one heard," she whispered.

"Did you tell anybody?"

"No. Give me the money!"

"Don't you trust me?"

"I do. But you could lose it."

"You too. The pockets in your dress aren't very deep."

"All right. Keep it. But watch out. Especially at night."

"But no one knows."

"They saw you leave . . . with the clothes . . . they know that you sold them. Watch out. At night."

He kept a part of the money in his pocket; the rest he hid in his hat.

This night they both struggled to stay awake. They checked time and again whether everything was still there.

Everything was there.

Finally they calmed down. At dawn they fell fast asleep they were so exhausted. And when they awoke the money was gone. Ranek leaped up. He ran up and down the room in despair and questioned everyone. No one knew anything. Some silently shook their heads, others laughed gleefully.

I I

Ranek had been lying for more than twenty-four hours on his place without the energy to get up. How long had it been since he had last eaten? He tried to remember. When had they eaten the first slice of the two loaves? And how long had they lasted? He tried to count but this confused him even more. You shared the last slice didn't you? he thought. You even quarrelled

over it . . . you can remember that exactly? But damn it . . . when was that? Why can't you . . . ?

Suddenly he remembered that Sarah had gone away by herself to find something edible. Perhaps she would be lucky and bring him something? This prospect gave him little pleasure because another thought—that she was still steady on her legs while he had conked out—filled him with impotent rage. He became progressively more enraptured with this rage. And this rage suddenly lent him new energy.

He pulled himself together. He drew in his legs and sat upright. He was determined not to lie down again.

It had to be late afternoon—the sun's rays entered at a low angle through the window. The room gave a friendlier impression now. What a difference it made when the sun shone in! Everything had a little colour now. Even the dirt. There were light yellow spots everywhere. The rusty stove glistened. The grey ceiling looked almost beige . . . and the headlines of the newspaper scraps on the opposite wall jumped into your eye.

He remembered something: the whorehouse . . . Betty . . . Sigi . . . an appointment. When was the appointment? He fell into deep thought. When? Damn it, when?

Then it came to him: this morning. Before Sigi left, he had said: "It's high time you went to the whorehouse."

"Yes," he had answered.

"When are you going?"

"I don't know."

"If I were you, I'd go this afternoon."

"Fine. I'll go."

"I've got to go now," said Sigi, "to the Bazaar."

"Then go."

"I'll wait for you in front of the whorehouse this afternoon," Sigi said.

"You?"

. . . then I'll let Daniel know. He'll get you back out."

"Fine."

"Yes," said Sigi. "I'll wait for you there. You'll go upstairs. I'll stand watch downstairs. In case something happens to you

Sigi grinned. "I want something for my services. You're going upstairs. You'll come down with a full gut. Bring something down for me."

"Yes."

"In the afternoon then! Around five. Ask someone who has a watch. I'll be waiting for you."

You should have visited Betty long ago, he brooded. Why'd you wait so long? If Sigi hadn't urged you to, then . . . then . . . you wouldn't go today either. Crazy . . . completely crazy . . . because you figured out that it was better to wait. You thought you could wring more out of her then. Makes a better impression . . . you let a certain amount of time pass . . . then you go there . . . and say: "I wasn't going to come at all, you know the way I am? Stupid pride, isn't it? But I can't take it any more. I had to come today."

Ranek rose with trembling knees. He put on his jacket and hat. As he shuffled towards the door he became dizzy and ran into the stove.

He noticed two men who were kneeling in front of the stove.

"Red died," one of them said.

"I don't believe it," said the other.

"He isn't moving."

"He's just dozing."

"I'll put a piece of paper in his mouth."

"Don't."

"Yes. He won't swallow it if he's dead."

"And if he's not croaked?"

"Then he'll wake up and pull himself together."

"Better leave him alone. He's not to be trifled with. He hasn't croaked yet."

Ranek had leaned against the stovepipe. He now let go of the pipe and reached for the pot that was half full of water. He set it to his mouth and started to drink hurriedly. He felt how the two men looked up but he did not let this bother him. He emptied the pot and put it back on the stove. Then he walked towards the door.

He heard one of the men say, "Man, is that fellow thirsty! Did you see that?"

"Yes. You know who that is?"

"He sleeps in the corner with the blonde."

He heard them snickering. Then he was out of the room.

On the street he began to feel better.

* * *

It was baking day at the whorehouse. The kitchen window stood open and the fragrance of fresh cake streamed into the street.

Sigi waited in front of the barbershop. When he saw Ranek stagger past the whorehouse on the other side of the street he called out his name.

Ranek came over to him.

"I was frightened when I didn't see you. Why are you over here?"

"Over there it would be too obvious what I'm up to," Sigi said. "I didn't want the doorman to notice."

"Have you been waiting long?"

"About an hour."

"I wanted to come earlier. But I couldn't."

"It's all right. The main thing is you're here."

"I hope it works."

"It has to work!"

They squatted down on the kerb, right below the wide window of the barbershop, and gazed across to the whorehouse. The doorman was standing on the threshold smoking his pipe as usual. Now and then a drunken soldier came out of the house, occasionally one would enter.

"Can you smell it?"

"Yes. I think the entire Pushkinskaja smells of cake today. I smelled it when I turned the corner."

"They have it rough," Sigi said enviously, "they get white flour from the army stores."

"They don't only get flour."

"Yes, I know, they get everything, all they want to have. You

know," he sighed, "if I had to be born again and God asked me : what do you want to be a little boy or a little girl? I would say to him, 'A little girl.' And if he continued to ask, 'Well, and once you're grown up what do you want to be then?' 'A big girl,' I'd say, 'a girl with a big fat arse—an arse that'll keep me from starving.'" Sigi rolled his eyes longingly. "Can you smell it?" he asked again.

"Yes, damn it."

"Guess what they're baking up there."

"Almond cake."

"No . . . flat cake . . . real flat cake with raisins and apples in them."

"You've a damned good nose."

Sigi smiled. "Sometimes it's better to have a cold. Before you got here a beggar tried sneaking into the whorehouse. It was the smell. The doorman beat him, he beat him so terribly that I almost felt sorry."

"The bastard. It's high time he croaked."

"That wouldn't help us. All we'd get would be another doorman. That's the way it is : if one of them is gone, the next one comes. That's how it always is. That's the way of the world." Sigi nodded with deep thought.

"You think he'll let me in?" asked Ranek.

"You must have a reason. Tell him you've a cousin upstairs."

"Wouldn't it be simpler if I told him I wanted to have a woman?"

"He wouldn't believe you. Somebody like you doesn't go in there to sleep with a woman. Somebody like you only goes to fill his gut. It's obvious."

"Then I'll stick to the cousin story."

"Of course. All you have to do is make the right impression. Then he'll believe you."

"And if Betty isn't there?" said Ranek uncertainly.

"I looked in the coffeehouse before," said Sigi. "She wasn't there. She's sure to be there."

They heard someone knock furiously against the window from inside the shop. They turned their heads and saw the barber

standing behind the thick pane of glass.

"The fag doesn't like us sitting in front of his place," Sigi whispered. "We're not classy enough for him."

"Let's get away from here!"

"Yes. Are you going over now?"

* * *

Sigi walked as far as the next house. He waited once more. He did not let the whorehouse out of his sight.

Ranek didn't negotiate long with the doorman. He returned soon.

"Nothing doing. That one's a hard nut."

"You didn't do it right."

"First he took me for a beggar. I even thought he would hit me, but you can see he didn't."

"Did you tell him that she's your cousin?"

"No. I thought it over. He wouldn't have believed that anyway. I just mentioned Betty's name to him. That really surprised him. So you know our Miss Betty? he said. And then he became a little friendlier. He explained to me why he couldn't let me up. Even excused himself."

"You don't say," fumed Sigi. "So he excused himself, to you."

"He told me something about a new regulation. They're not allowed to let civilians up any longer. Only police and soldiers."

Sigi relaxed a little. "That's possible, all right," he said.

"The fellow's afraid he'll lose his job. Can't do anything about that. But you can depend on it, I won't give up that easily. I'll get to talk to Betty yet."

"When?"

"Another time."

* * *

Later on they tried their luck in the backyard of the brothel. It was a long, dank yard with a high wall around it. The wall formed a kind of dam; behind it was the river. You couldn't see the river but you could hear it quite distinctly, a monotonous,

rushing sound as of a nearby water mill. An old, rotten wooden bench stood in the shadow of the wall. A few empty tin cans lay underneath. Clotheslines criss-crossed the yard.

"Too bad they took the laundry down," said Sigi.

"They didn't wait for us," said Ranek.

They looked round for a while. There was a dustbin next to the cellar stairs. They rummaged around in it but found nothing edible . . . again nothing but a few empty tins, in filthy, wet paper, looking as if they had been carefully washed out.

"People say the doorman sells the kitchen leftovers to the street vendors even before they're thrown into the dustbin."

"That's possible," Ranek said.

"He should croak," Sigi said. "They're the best leftovers in the whole ghetto." Sigi continued rummaging around excitedly. Finally he found a few bloody rags at the bottom of the can. "And they throw something like that away, they're mad."

"Menstrual rags."

"You know they're bloody, don't you?"

"You want to take them along?"

Sigi nodded. "I'll wash them and make foot rags out of them."

"They're good rags," Ranek said. "Not even worn out. We'll split them. You'll give me a couple, won't you?"

"Yes," Sigi said generously.

* * *

Betty did not appear in the coffeehouse during the following days. Ranek had no idea what was the matter. Was she sick? Or was she on day shift this week and couldn't come outside for that reason? He had to make contact with her again. She had promised him something to eat . . . he knew her . . . she would keep her word.

A few times he scribbled messages on scraps of paper and gave them to the whores to take to her in the brothel. No use. There was never an answer. They probably thought he was a beggar who'd found out Betty's name by accident and now wanted to use it as a ruse to sneak into the house, and they threw the notes away as soon as he was out of sight.

He tried the doorman once more, but the doorman had only one reply : I'm no postman. If only he could meet Betty's friend—the fat girl! She knew him and would tell her everything. But he didn't see her around, either.

He had no choice but to wait. Betty couldn't sit in her room forever. She had to come back down one of these days. It was the same with the fat girl. He was bound to meet one of the two again. You'll just have to wait, he told himself, you'll just have to wait.

Ranek spent entire afternoons walking up and down in front of the brothel. At times he simply planted himself in front of the entrance without worrying about the doorman.

12

Hunger often woke him up in the middle of the night. Then he sat for hours huddled together in his place. Sarah, on the other hand, slept deeply and firmly. She slept like a person who had had enough to eat.

Ranek became suspicious. He tried to remember how often he had brought her something from his daily expeditions : stolen potatoes, or beets, sometimes also kitchen leftovers that he had received in exchange for cigarette butts. But she always came home empty-handed. Something is wrong there, he thought. She's keeping something from you. She's not starving as much as you are. She seems to have her own source of supply, and she won't tell you.

She always went off by herself. Where did she go?

One morning he followed her as she was leaving the sanctuary. She seemed to feel safe. She didn't turn her head once. She went across the Bazaar. She walked along the Pushkinskaja. She walked on and on. Then she turned off ; into a small narrow side street and disappeared there in one of the crooked houses.

A burned-out Russian tank stood before the house. Easy to

remember, Ranek thought. The tank. The Red Star. You'll find your way back here next time. He stepped inside. A stairway. A better stairway than in our place, he noted : it doesn't hang half in the air. The sound of children's voices. The noise became increasingly louder the farther he walked upstairs.

Upstairs there was a long hallway that led into an open room covered with straw mats. No one was there except for a crowd of children and a corpse that lay peacefully on his straw mat. Where were the people that lived here? Were they outside? He noticed a door. So there's a second room, he thought. Who lives there? Curious, he went up to the door but did not step inside. He heard voices. He tried to make out whether one of them could be Sarah's voice. No, he thought, not her voice. But that didn't mean anything. He knew that she was in the second room; he hadn't entered the wrong doorway. She was here. Certainly.

For a while he watched the children at play. They were playing tag. If you went in there now, he thought, it could become unpleasant for you. You'll wait here and surprise her when she comes out.

The door opened after a time and a man with a soup bowl in his hands came out. He was concentrating on his food and paid Ranek no attention. Ranek couldn't see his face, since it was bent deep over the bowl. Just some hungry mug, he thought, who wants to spoon up his soup without anybody watching. The man with the soup bowl now went to the window and turned his back to him.

Ranek stepped up behind the man because he wanted to inhale the smell that rose from the bowl. The man had an unusually rapid way of eating; his back was bent, his head twitched—the head was shaved. Suddenly the man turned his face to him.

"Sigi !" Ranek exclaimed.

Sigi nodded. His eyes were moist; the physical and psychological enjoyment of eating was perhaps the reason why he was so touched.

"I was waiting for you to come here," said Sigi. "I knew you'd follow Sarah one day." Sigi chewed with a full mouth. Ranek could barely make out what he was saying.

"Pieces of meat," said Sigi, "in the soup . . . but I chew them anyway . . . you see . . . even without teeth."

"No bad jokes," Ranek said coldly. "I'm not in the mood." He'd quickly regained control of himself. "What does all this mean? What are you two doing behind my back?"

Sigi pointed with his head to the door. "Why don't you ask her yourself?"

"I want you to tell me. You know why."

Sigi nodded again. He now placed the plate on the window sill there was a little soup left in it. In the pale light that filtered through the window the soup looked like grey, dirty water with something dark and fibrous swimming around in it, something that conceivably could be meat.

"I know what you're thinking," Sigi said. "You think that I'm pimping for her. You think she's screwing there behind the door in the other room with someone. And that we . . . both of us get something to eat for it."

"What do you want me to think?"

"But you're wrong," Sigi said, grinning, "that is . . . I arranged something for her . . . but not that . . . not what you're thinking."

"Well what?"

"A pair of silk stockings."

Sigi stepped even closer to the window as if he were suddenly afraid that Ranek would grab the bowl. But Ranek did not push him away. Ranek seemed to have forgotten all about the soup at this moment.

"You're lying," said Ranek. "I sold the stockings myself and not even long ago."

"She had a second pair she'd never worn and which she kept hidden from you. She asked me to sell this second pair for her."

"I could have done that for her too."

"She doesn't trust you." Sigi added, "No longer."

"That beast," said Ranek.

"She thinks you're not sharp enough, that you wouldn't get the best price . . . that you would've screwed everything up . . . the way you did once before."

"That beast," Ranek repeated, "that damned beast."

"I wasn't supposed to tell you, but now that you're here there's no sense in not telling you."

"It's a good thing that you did," Ranek said.

Sigi wiped his face with the back of his hand a few times, squinting alternately from the soup bowl to Ranek. You'll finish it later on, he thought; first it's better to clear yourself in front of Ranek. He didn't know what Ranek's intentions were, but a sixth sense told him that Ranek's hatred at this moment was not directed against him but against Sarah, and in order to avoid trouble the best thing would be to take Ranek's side.

"I find the whole thing terribly unpleasant," Sigi said carefully. "You know I always act the middleman whenever I've a chance . . . but this time I didn't want to . . . didn't want to get involved." Sigi gave Ranek an innocent look. "But then Sarah talked me into it. You know what she's like. She can wrap you around her little finger. It's all her fault."

"Now don't wet your trousers," Ranek said cynically.

"I'm not afraid of you," Sigi said stubbornly. "I just wanted to explain to you—"

"I don't have anything against you," Ranek interrupted. "No need to explain anything to me. I'm here to settle accounts with Sarah, not with you."

"I knew that all along," said Sigi, relieved.

"She'll regret it bitterly," Ranek said laconically.

"I'd give her a beating if I were you," Sigi egged him on.

Ranek laughed through clenched teeth. "She won't get off with a thrashing. I want her share of what she made from the sale of the stockings—the remaining part."

"It's too late. We didn't get any money. Just food. Every day a plateful of meat soup with millet. We could really eat for an entire week. Today was our last day."

Ranek cursed hoarsely.

Sigi stole a glance at the window. Now you can go on eating, he thought, or you give Ranek the few spoonfuls that are left? No, he thought, it's too good for him, and today is the last day.

"Who did you sell the stockings to?" Ranek asked abruptly. "Who's that?"

"Someone in the room, behind the closed door."

"That I know. I want to know more about him."

"He's a shoemaker," said Sigi, "but I don't know his name. He works the black market on the side. Has a lot of food stashed away under the platform. Why do you want to know all that? Do you want to talk to him?"

Ranek stared at the locked door. "No," he said. "I just wanted to know."

Sigi now reached for the soup plate.

Ranek said suddenly, "Hand it over."

Sigi hesitated. Then he reconsidered, quickly fishing the last meat fibres out of the soup, stuck them in his mouth, gulped them down, and handed Ranek the plate. There isn't much left, he thought. A pitiful amount, he can have it.

When Ranek handed him the plate back, Sigi noticed Ranek's hands trembling; his face was ashen, and his eyes were like burned-out coals.

"Why doesn't she come out?"

"She'll be here any moment."

His hands are trembling from exhaustion, thought Sigi, and he wants to give her a beating. "We could wait for her on the street," Sigi suggested, "it's better on the street than in here . . . she'll only raise a fuss in here."

* * *

They positioned themselves at the next street corner. Sarah did not let them wait long. They saw her step out of the house. She was gnawing a soupbone. She was walking very slowly, like someone who dreams with his eyes open and is unaware of what is happening around him. A woman with a child was walking directly behind her. The child looked hungrily at Sarah.

"She doesn't even see us," whispered Sigi. "She only has eyes for the bone."

"You didn't see me either, before," Ranek said hoarsely.

When she wanted to walk past them, Ranek suddenly blocked her way. She looked up, frightened. She turned half to the left and started running.

Ranek quickly caught up with her. He grabbed her hair and with the other hand drummed on the back of her head until she went down on her knees; he pushed her on the pavement and stamped with his wrapped feet into her face, again and again, paying no heed to her imprecations. The rags on his feet began to slip off; his hat fell off while he bent down, his face was completely distorted, spittle drivelled from his mouth. "You bitch," he sputtered, "... you bitch, you bitch ..."

The woman and the child walked on without stopping.

The child kept turning around curiously, but the woman dragged it on.

"Why did he beat her like that?" the child asked its mother a while later.

"She committed a crime," the mother said.

"But she was only eating?" the child asked.

"That's just it," said the mother.

* * *

Ranek looked around for Sigi, but Sigi had vanished in the meantime. He now saw a man leave the shoemaker's house with a corpse on his shoulders—the same corpse he'd seen upstairs on the straw mat. As the man approached and saw Sarah, he stopped, astonished; he let the corpse slip to the pavement and kneeled down beside Sarah and wiped the blood off her face and helped her get back up.

Ranek picked his hat out of the gutter and quickly walked across the street.

He could hear the man shouting behind him, "Hey you, wait up ... wait up there ..."

When he came home, Axelrad the businessman was waiting for him at the door. "There you are, finally!" he shouted toward him. "Now you can relieve me for a while." Impatiently he drew Ranek into the room.

What did the little toad want from him?

The businessman pointed to a wet piece of laundry drying on the stovepipe. "Sarah washed her knickers early this morn-

ing. Before she left she asked me to watch them for her until she came back." He added, wringing his hands: "But the stuff won't dry."

"Usually I watched the laundry," Ranek wondered out loud, "but this time she didn't tell me anything about it."

The businessman smiled miserably. "Perhaps because she knows you've ants in your pants, whereas I'm home most of the time—on account of my swollen feet."

"Yes," said Ranek, "on account of your feet."

"Last week Sarah did a favour for my wife," the businessman said, "and that's why I couldn't say no to her today. One can't do something like that, right? I told Sarah this morning, 'You can depend on it—when I keep watch nothing is stolen. You can leave without worrying.'"

"Many thanks," said Ranek. "I'll relieve you now."

The businessman grinned miserably. "As I said, I hardly ever go out, but just today I have to leave . . . it's urgent . . . no fun with my swollen feet . . . but what can you do; my wife is alone at the Bazaar . . . someone promised us some flour, you know . . . a real bargain . . . and she can't drag the sack alone."

"Go on. Your wife must be waiting for you."

Before the businessman left he whispered into Ranek's ear, "Watch out for Red. He's like a tiger there under the stove."

"Don't worry," Ranek whispered back, "he won't get the knickers not as long as I'm here."

The pair of knickers was the only piece of clothing Sarah still owned except for her dress, which had become threadbare in the meantime; the knickers were of good quality and he would have no trouble selling them. He thought of Dvorsky. Dvorsky would buy them at once. But Dvorsky paid badly. The shoemaker looked like a better bet. If the shoemaker had fed Sigi and Sarah meat soup for an entire week, which made altogether fourteen meals, Ranek thought, then he would receive at least double that for the knickers which, after all, were worth more than stockings. He considered leaving at once or waiting until tomorrow. It was a dangerous undertaking in his state of exhaustion to go the long way to town twice on the same day.

But then he made a quick decision. Better to do it now, he thought, before she gets back.

He rested a few minutes on his place, just to catch his breath and to wait until the trembling in his arms and legs let up a little. Then he got underway again.

Sarah was coming back just then and chance would have it that while Ranek was leaving the room upstairs Sarah stepped into the hallway below. Ranek stopped short but did not turn back. They met on the stairs but passed by each other like strangers.

At this moment Ranek had no inkling of the fact that he would not come home this night; nor did he know that touching the seam of her dress, which grazed him inadvertently as they passed each other, would be their last physical contact, or that the broken outline of her figure in the dimly lit stairwell would disappear once and for all out of his life—as unexpectedly as it had entered it that rainy day to vegetate with him for a brief period.

Sarah stopped at the landing and stared after him. She did not have any idea either that the bed partner the dearth of living space had forced upon her would not return this night and that the place in the corner under the platform would be hers alone for a time . . . until someone else claimed it, another man or woman.

She murmured a hoarse, embittered malediction after him and stored away her last, fleeting remembrance of him : foot rags and strings, a torn suit, a crooked, badly battered hat.

13

Ranek had no difficulty finding the shoemaker's quarters again.

He wasted no time now in the front room but went directly to the door at the back and opened it. He saw a room half as large

as that in the sanctuary; it had a platform and a kitchen stove too, but the floor was swept and the walls freshly painted. In the middle of the room a crudely built table, a few stools. Everything pointed to the fact that the people who lived here had retained some of their self-respect. Two old men were lying on the platform. A woman stood in front of the stove; a little girl was squatting next to her, watching her cook.

The woman had seen him enter but she paid him no further attention. She was wearing an embroidered kerchief that hid half her face. When he addressed her, she tossed her head back and her entire face became visible: the woman might be forty-five years old; she looked tough and grumpy, yet also surprisingly healthy.

"The shoemaker isn't here," she said curtly when he repeated his question. "I'm his wife. Do you want to leave a message for him?"

"No, I'd like to speak to him myself."

"Who sent you?"

"My wife, the blonde who was here before."

"The one with the silk stockings?"

"Yes."

She looked at him suspiciously. "Your wife's not getting anything else from us; you're too late if you want to get something to eat."

"I know that. That's not why I'm here."

"My husband will be back around four."

"Can I wait in the meantime?"

"If you want to."

He pulled up a stool and sat down near the stove. The little girl, who was still squatting silently near the woman, stared fixedly at Ranek's foot rags. Ranek noticed this; he knew that she was staring only because of the bloody splotches on them. He was wearing the menstrual rags that he and Sigi had found in the whorehouse dustbin.

The child tugged at the woman's skirt. "Blood," she said, shuddering.

"That's none of your business," the woman said harshly. And

she turned to Ranek to excuse herself. "The little one is fresh, don't let her annoy you. It's the same with all of them, there's no educating them any longer these days."

"Yes, it isn't easy," said Ranek. He hesitated, then he forced it out. "I'm sure you're doing your best." He wanted to flatter the woman in some way because he hoped she might offer him something from the pot on the stove before the shoemaker came home, but he could think of nothing at the moment.

"I'm sure you're doing the best you can," he said.

The woman made no reply; she seemed to have forgotten his presence already. He watched her throwing wood in the stove and then blowing with much effort into the fire until she started to cough; she shut the stove again and wiped her sooty face with her kerchief.

"The stove isn't really drawing right. You probably put rubbish into it again," she said nastily to the little girl.

"No. It wasn't me."

"Something's wrong with the fire. Why's there so much smoke?"

"I don't know. It wasn't me."

"Open the window!"

The little girl didn't obey.

"Didn't you hear what I said?"

Ranek suddenly got up. "It's all right," he said quickly, "I'll open it myself," and thought to himself, Now she'll offer me something for sure.

It was a double window. While opening the inner casement he fleetingly saw his own image on the pane's dark background. It was half effaced: an unshaven face featureless in the shadow of the hat's wide brim. He stepped even closer to the window, but his face did not become more distinct. Then he suddenly felt as though this were not his own face at all staring back at him, but another face, which legally belonged to the hat: Nathan's face.

"Won't it work?" the woman called.

"It's working!" He pushed open the outer casement and went back to the stove.

"It sticks sometimes," she said, "because of the moisture." She didn't even thank him.

"The smoke will draw off now," he said with a friendly voice. The woman nodded.

"You've a nice room here," he said.

"Yes. We were lucky."

"How many of you are there?"

"Just fourteen."

"Then you're really lucky."

"Most of them are at the Bazaar now," she said, "almost everyone is trading in something or other. We've nobody that doesn't work here." She added, "Except for the old people."

"Yes, I can see that."

"How many people are living in your place?" she asked inquisitively.

"Sixty, I think . . . but maybe it's more. I never really counted them."

The woman laughed derisively. Then she bent back down over her pot.

"What are you cooking there?" he asked, even though he knew.

"Soybeans."

"That's very nourishing, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's good."

"My wife told me that you're an excellent cook," he said.

"Really?" She again laughed derisively, and then she turned towards him. "The compliment doesn't fit. I know what you're after and I told you before that I won't give you anything to eat!"

"I have a headache . . . such a strange hammering . . . if you only could just give me a little taste . . ."

"Just a little taste," she laughed. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"I can hardly stand up straight any longer."

"In that case why don't you sit down again. You are waiting for my husband, aren't you?"

Ranek squatted down on the low stool. He felt that it was

advisable not to disturb the woman and to wait quietly until her husband came home. However, the longer he waited the more unbearable became his hunger. Once he rose and staggered towards the stove, intending to push the woman away and seize the pot. But he controlled himself at the last moment—he knew the woman was much stronger than he.

"Sit down!" the woman said emphatically. "And don't try sneaking up on me again. It could turn out badly for you." While she said this to him the little girl anxiously held onto her apron, staring at Ranek's bloody foot rags at the same time.

It must have been much later than four o'clock when the shoemaker finally came—his wife looked at her wrist watch as he entered and said grumpily, "You're late again. I thought something had happened to you."

"What could have happened?" he said dejectedly.

"Where are the others?"

"Still at the Bazaar."

"Fine, then we can eat. We'll have the table to ourselves."

The man shyly kissed the back of his wife's neck. He was a little smaller than she, his face was bloated and pock-marked, yet it did not look as vulgar as hers.

The man took off his jacket and held it against the light.

"Did you catch something?" his wife asked.

"No, I don't see anything."

"They're all full of lice at the Bazaar. Are you sure you didn't brush against someone?"

"Quite sure." The man sniffed about the pot for a while; the woman pushed him away angrily, took the pot from the stove, and poured off the water.

"There's someone waiting for you," she said now while emptying the hot beans into a great soupbowl; she nodded towards Ranek. "He's the blonde's husband... the one with the silk stockings."

The woman proceeded to set the table. The man put his jacket back on and walked up to Ranek. "I didn't know you were waiting for me," he said, smiling, "otherwise I would have talked to you at once." He fiddled pendants with his shirt collar.

"Almost every day people come to us who wait for someone or other . . ."

"I can imagine that," Ranek said politely, "you've only got business people living here."

"Yes, that's true." He looked with amusement at Ranek's rags. "You're not coming to have new soles put on your shoes, are you? You're coming on business too, right?"

Ranek nodded.

"Silk stockings again?"

"No, underwear this time."

"Men's underwear?"

"I sold mine long ago," Ranek said, grinning weakly. "The underwear belongs to my wife." He got up now and drew the wet knickers out of his pocket. The shoemaker inspected them carefully. "Not bad," he said hesitantly.

"First class," stuttered Ranek, "not worn through at all, as you can see."

"Why don't you come back tomorrow," said the shoemaker.

"It's first class. Why don't you take it right away?"

"Because I first have to find a customer for it. I don't buy these things for my own household. Just for resale."

"You're bound to find someone who'll be interested. You're not taking a risk if you buy the knickers now."

"That may be the case. But safe is safe. Come back tomorrow. If I've found a customer we can discuss the matter then."

"You don't have to pay cash. I just want something to eat."

"I know that. Come back tomorrow!"

"Couldn't you give me at least a few beans . . . ?"

The man shook his head sadly. Now the impatient voice of the woman called, "Come! The food's getting cold."

* * *

On the street it occurred to him that it would be best to go to the whorehouse now. You simply walk upstairs, he thought, you don't care about the damned doorman.

While he walked along the narrow alley he felt the mealy

taste of the soybeans on his tongue as though he really had had a taste; he was so hungry he bit into his lips until they bled. And the blood too tasted like soybeans. He remembered that he had always been a bad eater as a child and that his mother had given him salted herrings before the main course, to rouse his appetite. "Otherwise he won't eat his noodle soup," she'd once said to his father by way of an explanation.

"You're spoiling him," his father had answered.

"He won't eat the meat, either," his mother moaned, "nor the *zimmes*."

Zimmes were carrots cooked with sugar. He'd never cared for them.

After a few minutes he reached the Pushkinskaja. First he walked to the whorehouse courtyard and looked for a water pump but did not find one; then he found a little rain water in a container under the rain pipe. He washed his chewed-up bloody lips and poured the rest of the water over his aching head.

When he stepped back into the street he noticed that the doorman had left and that the whorehouse was unguarded. Only a woman beggar and a child sat by the entrance. The woman cradled the child—a tiny, shrivelled skeleton—tenderly on her lap, singing all along, "*Buba, buba bubishka, buba, buba...*" The hunchback, he thought, who used to beg in front of the coffeehouse.

She held out her beggar's hand. "Do you have something for me today?"

"No, but perhaps another time."

He thought to himself, A good thing the doorman isn't here, you're in luck for once... you can go upstairs. And if the doorman comes back? Well, the hunchback won't tattle if you're nice to her now. Go ahead! Be nice to her.

"Aren't you living at Itzig Lupu's place any more?"

"No, not any more."

"Was the rent too stiff?"

"Yes, much too stiff." She smiled, "I'm rooming for nothing now. That's much better."

"Exactly what I think. Rooming for nothing is the most sen-

sible thing." He inquired: "Where are you living now?"

"In the whorehouse courtyard," she said.

"Isn't that dangerous?"

"You mean at night . . . because the soldiers are in the house?"

"Yes, that's what I mean."

She shook her head. "They don't come into the yard," she said, "and then . . . the ones who go to the whorehouse at night are drunk. Drunks are harmless."

"Yes," he said, "nowadays the drunks are harmless. Strange how the times change."

"Yes," she nodded, "that's funny."

He asked, "How old is your child?"

"Two years old."

"Really? That old?"

"Two years," she repeated, "and it's no bigger than a one-year-old baby."

"That's funny too," he said.

"It simply refuses to grow."

"You have to feed it a little bit of yeast," he joked.

She grinned back at him. "If this one dies," she said, "I'd gladly take another, even though it's so difficult to care for a child nowadays . . . just to have something in your lap, a small warm body like that . . . because you're so alone."

"Yes, I can understand that," he said.

"Of course, I can't have children myself any more," she said.

"If your little one here croaks you'll just adopt another," he said soothingly. "That isn't very painful and it doesn't cost anything, either; all you have to do is look around the ditches, you'll find plenty of these creatures there." He bent down and stroked the child, but she pushed him away at once. "Don't touch it," she hissed. "Your hands are much too coarse." And then she started to rock the child back and forth again. "*Buba, buba, bubishka . . .*"

Ranek paid her no further heed. He carefully turned the knob of the whorehouse door and peered inside. Then he stepped in and closed the door. He did not meet anyone. It was a long hallway; a few dusty lamps burned along the walls, shedding

an intimate light onto the worn-out, multicoloured Rumanian carpets. Rumanian carpets, he thought sadly, the same as the house in Litesty. . . . He moved awkwardly as if the ground were shaking under his feet; he wasn't used to treading on something soft any more. A gramophone was playing somewhere in the house. It was a soft sound; not until he had mounted the stairs to the second floor did the sounds become more distinct. He stopped for a few seconds and listened: a Rumanian tango. . . . He shook his head with astonishment and shuffled on. He heard the needle starting to scratch and then stop altogether.

When he reached the third floor, he went from door to door checking their numbers; some were barely distinguishable. Number Twelve, he thought; Betty had said, "Number Twelve, that's my room." Finally he found the door. He knocked a few times. There was no answer.

Perhaps she is with someone? he thought. Wait a while. . . . knock once more. . . . a little longer.

A door opened diagonally opposite Number Twelve. A man with a pipe in his mouth emerged. The doorman, it struck Ranek, damn it. . . . now of all times. The doorman hadn't seen him; he was looking in the other direction, towards the stairway. Ranek only saw his profile. "Thanks a lot," a woman's voice said. The doorman turned around once more and looked at the half-open door; he turned his back to Ranek. "Don't mention it," he said grumpily to the woman, whom Ranek couldn't see. "The lock will hold now and the next time something breaks you call me right away; that's what I'm here for."

"What would I do without you," the woman said jokingly.

"That's what I'm here for," the doorman said.

Now, thought Ranek. . . . before he turns around. . . . quickly. . . . go in! Silently he opened the door to Number Twelve, stepped inside, and locked it behind him just as softly. The room was empty. He gave a sigh of relief. His trembling hand still held onto the knob. Now he let go of it and put his ear to the door. In the hallway he heard the door close and the sound of muffled steps gradually receding down the stairway.

Now he looked around the room. His astonishment was

boundless. No platform but a wide bed, a good bed, a real bed. A thick carpet on the floor. A round table . . . and chairs that had four legs. An old-fashioned easy chair. A dresser with a revolving mirror. A pretty night table with a vase on it . . . so this still existed?

A glass ashtray stood on the table with a few butts in it. He pocketed them except one, which he lighted at once. Then he sat down on the easy chair and leaned far back. Let's hope she comes soon, he thought. He finished the butt and lighted a second one. He also smoked this one to the end. She can't stay away for too long, he thought; she too has to be inside before it's dark. Of course. She'll step in any moment now. She'll be a little surprised . . . but that doesn't matter. She'll give you something to eat, that's the main thing. And then you'll take off again; you're bound to make it home in time before it gets dark.

He stepped to the window and drew back the clean white curtains. The window faced west. From up here you had an unobstructed view of the Dniester, and, beyond the border, of an undulating green expanse. It's spring already, he thought, and you didn't even notice. Or did you? It's become a little warmer in the last few days; one doesn't freeze as dreadfully any more . . . actually only when it's windy, but even then only because one isn't wearing a shirt. And then . . . wasn't there also some green grass here in the ghetto, green grass shooting up among the ruins? And weren't there weeds flourishing in the ditches? And the thickets behind the sanctuary? Hadn't they changed?

He pressed his forehead against the cool glass pane. Perhaps because your heart isn't in it any more, he thought, perhaps that's why you didn't notice. It really is spring now, except that it is different for us here.

For seconds an absurd notion took hold of him, to be extinguished at once like a dangerous spark. No, he thought, escape from the ghetto is madness. There's only one thing: to wait until the war is over.

He had considered the idea of returning to his former home several times before, but always dismissed it. Escape as such was not the problem. The guards on the bridges were easy to fool;

all you had to do was swim across the river at night and you were on the other side, in Rumania. But what then? Where could you go? Without papers? And with the mark written all over your face? Over there you attracted attention at once, and if you were caught you were lost.

He gazed a while longer across the border, then he pulled the curtain shut.

Again muffled steps in the hallway, coming closer and closer, stopping before the door. Knocking on the door. The knocking was repeated. Ranek held his breath. Suddenly he had the feeling that the person in front of the door was looking through the keyhole. He quickly stepped to the side and leaned against the wall.

"Is it you, Mr. Jonell?" the doorman's voice asked. Ranek did not answer. He hasn't seen you, but he heard you, it shot through his brain . . . you have to answer something.

"Mr. Jonell, Miss Betty asked me to tell you that she'll be back soon."

Ranek coughed softly. The doorman grumbled something incomprehensible and went off.

Again approaching steps. The door to the room next door was opened . . . a man's voice . . . the voice of a woman . . . a brief laugh . . . a key turning in a lock.

Ranek stepped back to the window, but he did not stay long because the bright light made his eyes smart; he turned away and shuffled back to the wall. It was a very thin wall, you could hear almost everything that was going on in the next room. The creaking of the old bed. The squeaking of the rusty springs. And the panting breath of two people. He listened for a while but his ideas were elsewhere. He suddenly became afraid. Who was this Jonell fellow whom Betty was expecting? Some Rumanian soldier, most likely? What if he got here before Betty did and caught him? He tried to think what he should do in that case . . . You could hide behind the dresser. Or under the bed.

He wanted to walk towards the bed, but in the middle of the room he became so dizzy he had to stop and hold onto the table. The attack came with unexpected force. The room started spinning, his hands clawed more and more desperately onto

the table, he crumpled together, he pulled himself up again . . . and faltered toward the bed . . . and sat down on the edge . . . and held his leaden head in his hands.

He forgot completely that he wanted to hide. He had only one thought. It isn't anything. Don't be afraid that you're going to poop out now. It'll pass . . . like always . . . it isn't the first time this has happened to you. Slowly he lifted his head. For a while he stared empty-eyed at the dresser with the revolving mirror. An ashen, crinkled face looked back at him, not half-effaced as in the shoemaker's windowpane, but a face with distinct features, so distinct that he was startled.

And then the turning sensation began all over. First it was just his face in the mirror . . . and then the dresser . . . and then the floor . . . and the bed on which he sat. He suddenly held onto his knees but his legs seemed to be slipping away from him like two sticks on ice; he tried pulling them back and couldn't, he felt his head falling forward, his chin touching his chest, he lost his hat again, and could feel himself sliding off the bed. And then it became dark.

When he came to, he smelled freshly broiled meat, he heard the clanging of dishes, somewhere something was moved away, a table or a chair, and then a woman's soft voice, saying something to someone.

The remote sounds gradually became clearer, the smell of meat stronger, more irritating. He woke up completely and opened his eyes. His glance fell on Betty. She was standing in front of the table. He could see quite distinctly: Betty . . . the table . . . the window with white curtains in the background . . . also a part of the dresser.

Ranek slowly turned his head sideways because he wanted to see the stranger whom she had spoken to before. At first he thought it was the soldier, Jonell, but then he saw that it was just the doorman, standing in the door.

"The fellow's awake now," the doorman said suddenly. The expression on his face did not change; he stayed lazily by the door, hands buried in his trousers pockets, and stared at him over his pipe.

Ranek let his aching head fall back on the pillow. For a while he closed his eyes again, and when he opened them Betty was kneeling beside him.

"Oh, Ranek," she sighed, "if I'd known that it was so bad . . ."

"You knew it," he whispered.

"No," she sighed, "not like that, not like that . . ."

"You knew that they wouldn't let me come upstairs," he whispered. "Why didn't you tell me right away that—"

"I didn't think of it," she said gently, "I'd forgotten completely that they wouldn't let you come up."

"I waited for you downstairs any number of times. I thought . . . you'd come . . . you'd bring me something."

"I simply didn't think of it any more. I was so busy. But I promise you . . . from now on I'll come downstairs every day and bring you something. You won't go hungry any more. I promise you, Ranek."

She was smiling now. "When I came into the room you were lying out cold on the floor. The doorman was so nice and helped me put you on the bed."

"Yes, the doorman is a nice person."

"Don't be so bitter, Ranek. He would have let you come up. But he isn't allowed to. He has his orders."

She turned her head to the door. "You can go now," she said. "I don't think I'll need you any more tonight."

The doorman didn't budge. "Miss Betty, I'd suggest you don't keep the fellow in your room too long; perhaps Mr Jonell will turn up after all . . . and then . . . if the patrol comes."

"He won't stay long," Betty assured him.

The doorman grumbled something to himself, but he still didn't leave. Suddenly he came up to the bed. Betty swivelled round: "Why aren't you going?"

"I'd like to know how he got in here in the first place, when I keep such a sharp watch . . ."

"Yes. I know you keep a tight watch . . . I know it . . . we all know it."

"I'm telling you, that's a very tricky bastard."

Betty stood up and pulled the doorman away from the bed.

Ranek heard her whisper, "For God's sake, let him be. Don't lay hands on him . . . he's half-starved."

The angry voice of the doorman: "I know the type. A Jew through and through."

Betty's harsh laughter: "You're a Jew yourself, aren't you ashamed to say something like that?"

Then he left. The door closed. Betty came back to him. She took his hands into hers. "Ranek," she said, "try to sit up." She helped him to do so and placed a pillow under his back and one under his head, she kissed him on his week-old beard . . . like a sister, like someone who is very good. "Now you'll have a really good meal," she said tenderly, "and then . . . then we'll see. No, you can't stay here . . . but tomorrow you'll come back, tomorrow . . . you'll wait for me downstairs, won't you?"

"You are very good to me," he whispered hoarsely, "you almost remind me of Deborah."

Again the distorted laughter: "Deborah wouldn't have gone into the whorehouse. She would rather have died."

"We talk too much, Betty. That's all nonsense. I couldn't care less what you've done. You're good to me. You're like a sister to me. I won't forget that."

14

Towards evening it began to rain. The dried-out ruts in the street had turned into mud and disappeared; the whole town had been transformed into one huge morass.

When Ranek came out of the brothel he felt so nauseous he had to stop in front of the door. Betty had not been stingy with him, but it had been too much all at once, his stomach was not used to it any more, and besides, he had eaten too quickly. He waited a while and thought he would feel better eventually; he tried inhaling deeply, but it was no use.

The doorman, who was guarding the entrance again, watched him with a big gleeful grin on his face. "Aren't you feeling well?" he asked. Ranek made no reply. Keep walking, he told himself, don't stay here, rest somewhere else, he doesn't have to see it.

He walked across the street. A few steps away from the barber-shop he vomited.

After a while he felt a little better. He wiped his jacket clean and went towards home. The rain increased. He walked as quickly as he could along the deserted Pushkinskaja, crossed the Bazaar, which was just as desolate, and then took the usual route through the rubble fields.

After he had been walking for ten minutes through the down-pour, he realized that he had lost his way. Where was the exit from the rubble field? He should have reached it by now. Because it was becoming increasingly darker and since it was too late to turn back, he hurried on, hoping to discover some mark that would help him find his bearings.

Soon he reached an open street. He stopped and looked around for some ruin or lantern, some monument that was familiar and usually helped you find your way. He found nothing. Or was it already too dark? No, it wasn't. He had always been able to find his way in the dark before. This street was unfamiliar to him. Go on a bit, he thought, perhaps you'll meet someone who can tell you the way.

He was standing in the middle of the roadway. He waded through the thick mud back to the kerb, and then he walked on, into the unknown.

At first he encountered no one, but a little later he suddenly saw a man appear out of the rain.

"Go back!"

"What's the matter?"

The man pointed in the direction from which he had come. "Police. At the next intersection."

"Roundups?"

"I don't know. I only saw them from far away. But I advise you to go back."

"Thanks for the tip."

"Don't mention it. Better tell me if you've seen anything suspicious?"

"No. I've just come from the Pushkinskaja. It's all quiet there."

"That's good. Do you want to go back with me?"

"Yes. I've no choice."

The stranger had a leather briefcase which had immediately roused Ranek's curiosity, a briefcase that he was holding tightly against his thin, shabby overcoat, as though he were afraid the sharp wind would tear it away from him. He was not wearing anything on his head. His tie fluttered out from his coat, flapping into his face. It was a pleasant face that you felt you could trust.

Ranek joined him. They walked silently side by side, watching carefully where they were going and listening into the growing dusk. They heard nothing suspicious anywhere. They could see nothing except the mud and the broken grey line of the fields of ruins. And the only steps they heard on the road were their own, Ranek's shuffling gait and the crunching steps of the other man, who was wearing shoes with nails. After some time they reached a house that had a roof, and because it was still raining they sought refuge in the hallway.

"I don't believe we have to worry," said Ranek. "We would have heard something about it if there were going to be a razzia."

"You can never tell about that beforehand. You always have to wait."

"Did you really see police? Or did you just think you did?"

"Yes, they were policemen."

"A patrol?"

"No, there were too many of them for that."

"I believe . . . you saw them only from far away?"

"I could still recognize that much . . . that there were many of them."

"That still doesn't mean anything. After all, you saw no soldiers and no Ukrainian militiamen . . ."

"No, those I didn't see," the man said.

"Well, then," said Ranek, "there's nothing to it. I bet nothing will happen tonight."

The man laughed. "You're an oddball."

"Why?"

"Because you're suddenly pretending that everything's perfect; and you were about to dirty your trousers only a minute ago."

"That was a minute ago," Ranek said dryly.

Ranek stepped back into the street, peered carefully in all directions, and soon came back. Meantime the man had put his briefcase down on the floor and was making himself a cigarette.

"See anything?"

"No," said Ranek. "Nothing."

"We'll push on soon. Let's hope the rain lets up."

"Yes."

"Do you live far from here?"

"In the sanctuary," said Ranek. "You're sure to have heard of it? The house is well known."

The man shook his head.

"You see, I lost my way," said Ranek, "the damned rain, the damned dusk, somehow I left the path. The sanctuary is close to the old station. You must know where the old station is? Could you show me how I can get there? Once I'm at the station I can find the house."

"Yes, I know where the old station is. I'll show you the way later on."

The man rolled another cigarette and offered it to Ranek. "The tobacco has got a little moist."

"It'll burn. Thanks." Ranek offered a weak grin. "I thought you'd smoke a better brand."

"Because of the way I'm dressed?"

"Yes, you're not down and out, are you?"

The man laughed again. He gave Ranek a light. Then he lighted his own cigarette. "All of it inherited . . . except for the briefcase . . . that's still from the other side."

"What do you have in the briefcase?"

"Instruments, some dressing material."

Ranek emitted a soft whistling sound. "Dressing material?"

"I'm a doctor, Dr Hofer."

"Hofer," Ranek whispered as though he tried to recollect something. Then he shook his head.

"I used to be a gynaecologist . . . that is, a doctor who treats women."

"Used to be? Where? In the capital?" he asked distractedly, and he thought, Why aren't we going on: the rain won't stop anyway.

"No, not from the capital," said the man, "but from Chernovtsy."

"Were you returning from a house call just then?"

"Yes."

"What was it?"

"Typhus."

"Is that part of a gynaecologist's job?" Ranek asked mockingly.

"No. But during epidemics . . . and the scarcity of doctors . . ."

"I understand."

"You can't do much, anyway. There are no drugs. Not even on the black market. And the correct diet? Hardly anyone can afford that."

"So why do you keep making house calls?"

"If I'm asked to go I go. Besides I have to live."

"What do you get for a visit like that?"

"Sometimes a bowl of soup."

Ranek laughed softly. He took another drag from his moist cigarette, then he flung it out into the rain. Hofer did the same. They moved farther into the hallway and now walked carefully towards the stairs. It was a narrow hallway, barely wide enough for two men standing side by side. However the floor was covered with gravel and was not slippery. The stairs were not wood but rusty iron and circular. Along the right wall stood a dustbin with the head of a dead woman protruding from it.

"Don't look over there," said Hofer. "That's too nauseating."

It was surprisingly quiet here. Ranek wondered about the absence of the usual uproar that greeted you whenever you approached one of these flophouses.

"You can't hear a word coming from upstairs."

"Yes . . . how odd," said Hofer.

Once more they went to the front door and back to the stairway. "Do you have a piece of newspaper," asked Ranek, "so that I can rub myself dry? I'm soaked."

"Unfortunately not."

"Maybe there's some in the dustbin," said Ranek. He shoved the corpse aside a bit and rummaged around the bottom of the bin. He found a piece of packing paper, pulled it out, took off his jacket and proceeded to rub down his chest. When he was finished and put the jacket back on he said to Hofer: "I think it's time to get going. Otherwise it'll get too dark . . ."

Suddenly they heard hurried steps on the street. Then someone rushed through the gate: a breathless man. He wanted to run past them, but Ranek caught him before he could reach the stairs.

"What's the matter?"

"This whole part of town has been blocked off. Is there a place you can hide here?"

15

It had rained into the hallway again. A good thing the ceiling didn't leak.

Sigi stood by the window. He turned down the lamp wick. The room became almost completely dark. Only at the other end of the room, near the kitchen stove, could you see the floor reflect the red glow of the flames.

Sigi carefully pushed the cardboard pane aside and peered out into the yard.

"You see anything?" asked the businessman, who stood behind him.

"No. It's just a habit of mine. You don't have to worry. They won't come here tonight."

"How do you know that?"

"Someone told me . . . someone who knows the score."

"Who's that?"

"An acquaintance of Ranek, a policeman friend."

"That exists?"

"Yes, he's friends with Ranek."

"Was he here?"

"Yes. Towards evening. He was looking for Ranek."

"What did he want from Ranek?"

"He wanted to warn him . . . wanted to tell him to stay at home tonight because there would be razzias in the centre of town tonight."

"So there are razzias after all?"

"Yes."

"Not in our area, thank God!"

"You might as well thank God twice," mocked Sigi.

"Isn't Ranek home?"

"No, not yet."

Sigi slid the cardboard pane back into place and turned the wick up.

Sarah was standing at the stove. She was boiling the bone she'd brought with her from the shoemaker. The bone had fallen on the street when Ranek had beaten her, but she had picked it up later on.

Large, ugly blue splotches on her face showed how badly she had been beaten.

Ranek hasn't come back yet, she thought. Did he just get delayed . . . ? Or isn't he coming back . . . ? No, she thought, he wasn't delayed. Something's happening in the centre of town. The policeman said so. So they . . . ? Of course. They nabbed him! He isn't coming back . . . Yet this thought gave her no pleasure. Her hatred had already evaporated. Then she told herself, It's better with him than without him. At least Ranek protected her from the other people in the room. She knew she was still good-looking—even very good-looking in comparison with the other women here. Seidel had his eye on her, Sigi, and a few others, Red, too. She wouldn't be able to sleep peacefully any more if Ranek didn't come back. They would come crawling like

wild animals. Suddenly she felt dreadfully afraid of sleeping in this room without anyone to protect her. Hadn't he said so? No one gives a damn for the other person! No one, she thought. No one will give a damn what happens to you . . . And the people believe in nothing, respect nothing, nothing is sacred. All they can do is sneer.

She looked furtively under the stove. Red lay there with his eyes closed, but she knew he wasn't asleep. His sweaty shirt was open and she could see his rust-coloured, matted chest hairs. The first day, she thought, when you came here, even then you didn't trust the man under the stove. . . .

The door opened: Mrs Dvorsky. "Just wanted to check whether everything was all right over here," she said to Sarah.

"That's nice of you."

"Is Ranek back?"

"No."

"He'll come."

"Perhaps."

"That can happen. Once my husband also came back late at night and nothing had happened to him." She said something else that was equally reassuring. Then she left. After the door had closed behind her, Sarah asked herself why it was that Mrs Dvorsky, who was renowned for her wicked tongue, had come over to calm her. Odd. There's no understanding people.

At this moment she accidentally stepped on the legs sticking out from under the stove. She heard Red curse . . . then, a suspicious movement, as of a prone body turning over once. His head appeared between the legs of the stove; he crawled a little farther, suddenly stretched out his hand and lifted her dress. She heard him bellow.

"Let go of my dress at once!" she said.

"Why did you step on me? Everyone steps on me, as if I were a dog."

"Other people are stepped on too. There's no avoiding that. Let go of my dress!" However, she did not budge. She stood there as if nailed to the spot. She was afraid that her dress might rip if she stepped backward.

"You stepped on me on purpose," said Red.

"No, no, I really didn't," she said, trembling. "Don't pull my dress like that. It'll tear."

"You're wearing no knickers," Red said suddenly. His head butted against her knee, he started to pant, and then he repeated, "You're wearing no knickers."

"If you tear my dress I'll make you pay for it. Let go."

"Ranek stole them," the voice hissed. "I saw him . . . he put them in his pocket, then he left."

"If you don't let go at once, I'll scream." She now grabbed his hands, bent down, and bit. The head pulled back, he let go of her dress, his arm fell on the floor. She quickly took the bone out of the pot and went to her place.

Ranek had taken the knickers with him, she thought, but she did not hate him even now. He would have taken them anyway, sooner or later, she had known it all along, it didn't matter to her now. Hope he comes back, she thought . . . just so that I won't be alone, just so that I won't be alone . . .

It was late. Very late. The lamp had long since gone out. The fire in the stove was dead.

But it was still raining outside.

No, she thought, Ranek was not delayed. They nabbed him. She tried to imagine which of the many men in the room would come to her tonight, but one face displaced all the others, a freckled, repulsively ugly face. If Red comes, she thought in despair, I'll scream . . . I'll scream so loud that it can be heard on the street.

* * *

Old Mrs Levy was sleeping as usual, turning from one side to the other, muttering hoarsely. After a while she woke up, crawled back to the wall, and sat up. The old woman was suffering from running sores and wore a dirty bandage around her neck. Now she unwound it.

"Do you have to do that now?" hissed Sarah, who felt sickened by the smell of pus.

"It won't take long," said the old woman, "I'll put the bandage right back on."

"Couldn't you wait until tomorrow?"

"No. I'm hurting. One of the boils is already open . . . but the other one . . . it hurts so . . . it's almost unbearable. Couldn't you lend me a pin?"

"I don't have one."

"It doesn't take long. The boil is ripe. I just want to pop it. I'll give the pin right back to you."

"I already told you I don't have a pin."

"A knife?"

"No."

"You always have a knife."

"It's Ranek's. I don't have one."

"All right, then I'll do it with my fingernails."

She heard the old woman moan. A little later she asked, "Is it open?"

"Yes."

"Do you have an extra bandage?"

"Yes."

"Throw the old one away," she said, nauseated. "I don't want to become infected. Take it away from here."

"I'll throw it away at once . . . There . . . gone it is."

"Where did you . . ."

"What does it matter? Gone it is!"

The old woman lay down again. Sarah, too, huddled into her corner and closed her eyes. She was afraid again. There was a great pressure on her chest. You can't hear anything, she thought. Not a single shot. No scream. Only the rain. Where did they take Ranek? To the Bug? Will they kill him? Or perhaps they didn't take him to the Bug . . . ?

His face rose up before her inner eye, then his haggard figure amid a deathly, weary column.

Later she was overwhelmed by sleep. Ranek's face withdrew, shrank, dissolved into a white mist. A white hand waved to her. And then the hand turned into mist too.

* * *

This night she dreamed of her past.

She dreamed of the day on which she married the boring public-school teacher for the sake of the little security that he embodied. She dreamed of the marriage night and of the nausea and the bitter disappointment. She dreamed of her pregnancy, of the labour pains, and the birth of the child.

And she dreamed of Sunday afternoons on which she and her pendentic, bespectacled husband had gone walking in the public garden with the baby carriage . . .

It was bright Sunday weather. A colourful crowd of people surged through the manicured alleys of the spacious park. Occasionally you met acquaintances among the walkers or on the benches. You greeted them briefly.

The teacher was pushing the baby carriage. It was a modern product with an adjustable white leather awning and small hard-rubber wheels. The teacher pushed it with just one hand. He held a volume of Schopenhauer in the other. Schopenhauer was his favourite author, he read him again and again, as if he had to know his work by heart.

Now he started talking about the book again although he certainly must have known that she did not want to become involved in a discussion. She hated discussions. She had other worries. There were more important things to talk about on Sunday, and happier ones. She looked furtively at him. Funny. He was quite sensitive usually, but when he talked about this book his mouth became set and his smile grew hard and cynical. He pushed his spectacles forward a little now. "People say Schopenhauer is a pessimist," he said now. "That isn't so. He was a sensible man, that's all. He saw life the way it really is. Don't you think so too?"

"I don't know," she said, bored.

She asked, "Do you have the baby's bottle?"

"In my pocket," he said angrily.

"Give it to Lea," she said.

"You give it to her. The people are looking at us anyway because I'm pushing the carriage. No one does that."

"I do it all week long," she said. "We agreed that you would on Sunday . . ."

"All right, all right," he said, calming her down. "Hold this a second." He handed her the Schopenhauer. They stopped. The teacher placed a stone under the carriage's front wheels, then he pulled the milk bottle out of his pocket and bent tenderly over little Lea.

Suddenly she heard glass break somewhere. She had the feeling that he dropped the milk bottle, and woke up startled.

The apparition was gone. Nothing was broken. It was only old man Stein shoving the chamber pot into place near the door, scraping the floor.

Old man Stein noisily emptied his guts. He coughed loudly to pretend that he made a different noise. This awoke a child who proceeded to bawl... one of Seidel's children, probably the youngest. Someone shouted, "Quiet."

It must be midnight, she thought; Stein always goes to the pot at midnight; he's as punctual as a clock. She stared toward the door. It was too dark to see the crouching figure. Soon she heard him shuffle back to his place. Then it was quiet again.

Suddenly she sensed that someone was watching her.

"Sarah!"

"Yes."

"Try to sleep! Don't think of Ranek!"

"I'm not thinking of him at all."

The old woman placed her mouth close to her ear. "Before, while you were asleep, there was a man here."

"Red?" she asked with a shudder.

"No. It was Sigi."

"What did he want?"

"You know exactly what he wanted," she hissed. "I chased him away."

Part Two

I

About three weeks had passed since Ranek's disappearance. One evening . . .

Old Mrs Levy had just dozed off, when loud voices could be heard coming from the hallway. She awakened at once, sat up, and crawled forward, towards the stove. She didn't dare open the door even though she knew there were no roundups at the moment. No, she thought, not that; things have quieted down in the city, thank God, and that noise outside in the hallway was not the police. But no one likes to open the door until it is absolutely necessary.

She listened. What she heard were men's voices. One of them spoke louder than the others : a hoarse, uneven voice. Suddenly she knew who it was : Ranek, it hit her . . . that's Ranek, I'll be damned if it isn't.

A little later the door opened. Someone walked through the dark. She grabbed a foot.

"Ranek !" she whispered.

"It's me," the man said, "it's me, Sigi." But the old woman wouldn't let go of his leg. "Sigi," she said imploringly, "I heard Ranek's voice in the hallway. Tell me . . . is it him?"

"Yes, it's him. I was just in the hallway as he came back . . . I couldn't believe my eyes . . . sneaks up the stairs . . . suddenly stands beside me at the banister, slaps me on the back, and says, 'Well, you old bastard, how are you? Were you pissing in the hallway again?' "

"That's him all right," the old woman said, and giggled. She

was still holding onto Sigi's leg. She heard more voices outside in the hallway. She listened and then she thought, Why isn't he coming inside? Who's he talking to? What's the matter?

"I thought for sure Ranek was rotting somewhere," Sigi said now, "But the fellow has more luck than brains. They didn't hurt him."

"Where was he?"

"Not at the Bug."

"Not at the Bug?"

"He couldn't have walked that far on his spindly legs," Sigi said.

"Doesn't one take a train if one goes to the Bug?"

"Of course. All I mean is that he wouldn't have walked back from there. You understand, don't you? All you get is one free ride."

"Sure." The old woman grinned back at him. "Where was he?"

"Forced labour. Bridge construction." Sigi lowered his voice as if he were telling a secret. "Outside the ghetto, about ten miles from here they're building a bridge."

"A new bridge?" the old woman asked.

"Yes, brand new."

"Did they let Ranek go just like that before the bridge was—"

"They don't let anyone go," Sigi said coldly. "You know yourself that they don't."

"Yes, I know."

"Many people are beaten to death while they're doing forced labour," Sigi whispered, "the slowpokes for one . . . just as your son was."

"Yes," the old woman said softly, "they killed my son with an axe."

"You see, your memory is still good," Sigi said derisively, "and I was beginning to think it was all clogged up."

"I can remember that as if it had happened yesterday," the old woman said.

"Only the slowpokes are beaten to death during forced labour," Sigi hissed, "not the good workers."

"Not the good workers," the old woman whispered.

"They drop dead of their own accord," Sigi said. "No one can take it for long."

"Yes," the old woman said, "no one can take it for long. And they don't let anyone go. But Ranek is back, isn't he?"

"Ranek took off," Sigi said.

The old woman nodded.

"Ranek can deal with situations," she said slowly. "He doesn't let himself be killed as easily as that."

"You seem to have a high opinion of Ranek." Sigi giggled.

"He won't let himself be killed as easily as all that," the old woman repeated with a voice full of respect.

"Do you think you could let go of my foot now?" said Sigi.

"Did you tell him about Sarah?"

"No, I'll leave that to you."

"Then he doesn't know that she—"

"No, no. I told you I didn't tell him anything. Let go of my foot now."

"Why isn't Ranek coming inside? Who's he talking to?"

"He brought someone along. Someone they nabbed with him. The fellow is a doctor."

"What's his name?"

"Hofer," Sigi snapped. "Let go of my foot..." He suddenly clenched his thin hands and beat impatiently on the kneeling woman's head. Whining, she released her grip.

"So, you beast," Sigi growled, and rubbed his aching foot. In the pitch dark he groped his way to his place along the edge of the platform.

* * *

The old woman waited tensely in the dark. Again the soft squeaking of the worn-out hinges... a breath of fresh air... then a crash as always when the door was opened too wide and slammed against the stove. Now, the old woman thought, that's him!

The figure on the threshold was unrecognizable. The old woman merely sensed who it was. She imagined that she could see a slight thickening in the dark doorway, as though the dark-

ness where he stood had been concentrated. Because she could not hear any steps she thought that Ranek was hesitating. Perhaps he senses danger, she thought. Or was she mistaken? He doesn't know that Sarah isn't here any more. And he doesn't know that his place has been taken . . . but he should be able to work that out by himself. And then . . . had Sigi really not told him anything?

She heard the door close. "Ranek," she called softly, "here, over here!" But he stumbled past her in the direction of the window.

Oh, I see, she thought, he wants to get the lamp first. Of course. The lamp. It's still in the same place where you always looked for it. The old woman smiled. So, she thought, now he'll get the lamp. And then he'll stumble back, and put the lamp on the floor, in the corner by the stove where his sleeping place used to be. Ranek is a man of habits.

The old woman slowly crawled back to her place. She laughed softly to herself and she thought, He has a nice surprise waiting for him.

* * *

"Sarah is dead," the old woman said to the figure squatting by the lamp.

Ranek didn't say anything. The smoke rings from his cigarette moved phlegmatically, as in slow motion, backward across his sloped shoulders. Only now he said, "So she's dead?"

His voice was leaden, but the old woman knew: not from pain, merely from indifference.

"So she's dead," he said again, and he blew smoke into the old woman's face. Suddenly he began to laugh. "I always thought to myself that she . . . would drop dead all of a sudden . . . just when no one would be expecting it."

"She had food poisoning, from the rubbish she was eating. You see, that's what happens when hunger gets the better of you and you no longer know what you're eating."

The old woman crawled a little closer. "Why don't you put

the lamp on the stove!" she said. "The light is hurting my eyes."

Ranek did as he was told. Then he came back.

"Sigi told me that you brought someone with you," the old woman said, "a doctor."

"Yes, that's right."

"Is he still in the hallway?"

"Yes, he's going to sleep there tonight."

"That's the best thing, too," the old woman said. She had been noticing for some time that Ranek was staring fixedly into the corner under the platform; she pointed at the man sleeping there and grinned.

"Who's the fellow on my place?" Ranek asked.

Her grin became even wider, her finger bent with merriment. "Take a guess!" she giggled.

"Go on! Who is it?"

"Sarah's husband," the old woman laughed, "the public-school teacher."

"Sarah's husband?" he grunted hoarsely.

"Yes," she said, "surprise, eh?" She combed with her twisted old fingers through her hair, smoothing it down for a time. "Sarah told you about her husband, didn't she?"

"Not much," he said. "I remember she said she had lost track of him completely."

"That's true. She had no idea where he was. And then he suddenly popped up." Her mouth became serious again. "You know," she said softly, "there are so many people coming into the ghetto nowadays looking for their relatives, people who've been deported, vanished, or who are considered dead . . . one day they pop up again . . . And if you suddenly meet them again it is really as if someone from a mass grave stood in front of you, asking, Tell me, do you happen to know my wife? Or my sister? She has such and such colour hair . . . she's about that tall . . ."

"Where was Sarah's husband?"

"In Bershad," the old woman said, "some rotten little Ukrainian town, that's what this Bershad is."

"So they dragged him off to Bershad. And she didn't even know it! Did she at least see him once more when he got here?"

"Yes. But she did not recognize him. He came just in time to get her place."

* * *

"Tell the fellow that I want my place back!"

"He's asleep now," the old woman said. "Don't disturb him."

"I'll wake him up myself, then."

"That isn't going to do you much good. There are no reserved seats here. Besides, you were gone much too long."

"Too long? Just three weeks!"

"Three weeks of forced labour," she giggled. "Three weeks with the bridge construction gang."

"How do you know?" Ranek asked.

"From Sigi."

Ranek nodded thoughtfully. "It was a long time," he said softly. "Sometimes it's hard to believe that three weeks can be so long."

Ranek suddenly pulled something out of his jacket pocket: a bottle. He placed it to his lips and drank. Then he handed the bottle to the old woman. "You can take a sip," he said.

"What is it?"

"Schnapps."

"Genuine?"

"Yes. Just one swallow, you hear! Or I'll break your neck."

The old woman gurgled. He tore the bottle out of her trembling hands and stuck it back in his jacket.

"Another," the old woman begged, "another!"

He ignored her entirely.

"Where did you get the bottle?"

Ranek grinned and took a drag from his cigarette. He had to cough. Then he said, "A corpse gave it to me. The corpse said, 'you can keep it.'"

"Sick joke. You probably found the bottle next to a corpse."

"Yes, that's the way it was. I found it."

"Did they kill many?"

"I didn't count them." He cleared his throat again. "There was a pile," he said, "... what I mean is a pile of corpses ... we

were told to throw them in the river . . . one after the other . . . it's filthy work . . . worse than the work on the bridge."

"And that's where you found the bottle?"

"In the middle of the pile. No idea how it got there."

"Perhaps the bottle belonged to a soldier who left it there?" the old woman suggested.

"That's possible."

"Give me one more sip."

"No."

"Please."

"I want to get food for it tomorrow. That's more important."

The old woman let up. "That is more important," she said softly.

She inspected his face. Why does he keep talking to me? she thought. He never used to.

Suddenly something dawned on her : he has lost his sleeping place. Perhaps he thinks that I— No, I can't take him into bed with me.

"You can't sleep with me," she said, smiling, "even though I wouldn't have any objections, but you can see for yourself : where would I put you?"

He seemed to ignore what she was saying.

"Something will be free again in a few days," she whispered. "Do you know the Gottschalk brothers . . . ? What . . . ? You don't . . . ? Even though you lived here for so long . . . ? Well. One is Leo, the other is Benny. Benny and Leo Gottschalk, don't forget. They're both overdue."

"Both of them?"

"Yes."

"And where am I supposed to sleep in the meantime?"

"In the hallway . . . like the friend you brought along." In a sudden onrush of emotion she seized his hand. "Of course you can use my place during the daytime . . . when I'm not here . . . doesn't matter to me at all . . . I'm glad to do it. I know you're a decent person . . . I haven't forgotten all the things you did for my son . . . how you hid him under the boards, how you troubled yourself over him. No, I haven't forgotten that." She whispered

almost inaudibly, "And the bread you gave me that night, I haven't forgotten that, either."

"I won't go in the hallway," Ranek blurted out, and the old woman noticed that his hands began to tremble. "The damned hallway," he said, "the damned hallway."

The old woman knew that Ranek despised the hallway.

"Now that I'm back I won't go out there," he said, "I'll stay in here now."

"And how will you do that?"

"I'll speak to Red about it. I brought a few potatoes back with me. They're in my pocket. I'll give him one. Perhaps he'll let me sleep under the stove?"

"A good idea. That's right down Red's alley. When did you get the potatoes?" she asked.

"After I was caught," he cleared his throat, "Sarah made me a present of her knickers just before—"

"Made you a present?"

"What's the difference? I had them in my pocket," he continued, "and I sold them."

"Where? While you were doing forced labour?"

"Yes. On the bridge."

"So . . . you were trading even there?" she asked with disbelief. But Ranek no longer answered her; he had left her and crawled to the stove. The old woman reached for the butt he'd thrown on the floor and placed it between her lips. It was wet and loosely packed. She spat it out again. Let's hope Ranek gets the place to sleep, she thought, while her dim eyes were riveted to the spot in front of the stove where Ranek squatted and Red's legs protruded like two leftover sticks of wood.

She saw Ranek shaking Red. Let's hope it works, she thought, and then she turned her head away because it occurred to her that it was time to wake the teacher to tell him the news.

She jabbed the sleeping man. She jabbed him with her elbow. But the teacher was fast asleep and didn't move.

She didn't know much about him: a phlegmatic person who looked a little sleepy even during the day. He didn't say much . . . and when you got him to talk he'd only discuss the pains in

his behind. He had a wound there, supposedly caused by a knife, which refused to heal. And then he was an educated person who must have had other things on his mind. Or did he simply refuse to talk about them? Sarah once told her how he used to speak about books at one time.

He was tall, had long disjointed arms that dangled loosely while he walked—as if he didn't know where to put them. He had an egg-shaped dome and he combed his thinning hair from back to front to hide his balding pate. The eyes behind the double-thickness glasses were pale blue like watery ink.

She shook him again. Finally he woke up. Slowly he arose. His sleepy face made a foolish and disturbed impression.

"Ranek's come back," the old woman whispered.

"Who's Ranek?"

"I told you about him! He's the man who lived with your wife."

The teacher flinched. His pale eyes widened.

She knew; now he was wide awake.

He stared at her for a while. Then he said slowly, "Yes . . . him . . . I had forgotten his name."

"You'll be able to speak to him shortly. "Don't reproach him. Try to forgive him."

"Forgive?"

"He saved her life. You should never forget that. He's a decent man."

The teacher fell silent. The old woman's eyes bore hypnotically into his face. "He didn't possess her," she whispered, "at least not really. I'm a witness."

The teacher moved his lips but still didn't say anything.

"That's all unimportant," said the old woman. "The only thing that counts is that he brought her in off the street."

The teacher took off his glasses and wiped his eyes. He lay back down again. After a considerable pause he whispered, "There are still decent people in the world after all."

* * *

The deal with Red had been completed. Ranek was allowed to

sleep under the stove for several nights on the condition that he pay Red in advance : either food or cash. It was an expensive arrangement, but Ranek was much too exhausted to worry about it now. He crawled under the stove, put down his jacket, placed his hat under his head—the way he always did.

Red had intentionally assigned him the worst spot : where the stove adjoined the door at a sharp angle. Because his head lay next to the door hinges and was exposed to the cold draught he shoved the hat a little farther away from the door, again making himself as comfortable as possible. But then he noticed that he was lying almost on top of Red. He changed his position again and tried sleeping the other way around, the legs against the door, the head underneath the stove. But this wasn't any good either; before he had at least been able to extend his legs and let them stick out from under the stove, the way Red did, and this was allowed : you simply shoved your legs between the bodies sleeping near the stove . . . Legs didn't take up much space and the people hardly noticed them. But it was an altogether different matter with the upper part of your body. Ranek couldn't move it any farther into the room. What was he going to do with his legs if he stayed the way he was, now that the door was closed? Open the door and let the legs hang out onto the landing? He didn't want to do this under any circumstances. Therefore he had no choice but to put the hat back against the hinge.

Thick cobwebs stretched between the stove legs. He caught his hair in them whenever he lifted his head. You have to lie flat, he thought, then you won't get them in your face.

Despite his exhaustion he could not fall asleep. The dampness on the floor seeped through his jacket. Perhaps Red had urinated, he thought. The idea obsessed him. "Listen," he whispered into the darkness, "it's damned wet around here."

"You have less reason to complain than anyone else," Red replied grumpily. "Be glad you can sleep here. Or do you want to join your friend in the hallway?"

"No," said Ranek, "not that."

"I wouldn't like to be him," said Red.

"Me neither," said Ranek.

"You never know when they're going to come...and out there..."

"Yes, I know. I'm glad to be in here. I wasn't complaining. It was just an observation. Forget it."

"It's all right." Suddenly he asked, "You aren't worried about the fellow out there?"

"No, don't have the energy to worry."

"Doesn't matter as long as it's him...and not you?"

"Sure."

"Is it true he's a professor?"

"Who told you that?"

"You said so yourself, before."

"I said he's a doctor...I said nothing about his being a professor."

"That's the same thing."

"It's not the same thing."

"Are you good friends, you two?"

"They caught us together, and we came back together. That's all there's to it."

"That's what I thought." Red said nothing else for the time being, and Ranek thought he only wanted to sleep. But he was mistaken. "Do you have another potato? A fried one?" he suddenly asked.

"A raw one only."

"Doesn't matter. Give it to me."

"You got your share. That's all you're getting."

"Give it to me!" Red said once more.

Red uttered a guttural sound. The joints of his fingers drummed nervously on the floor, then his body jerked, his hands grasped one of the stove legs, and slowly he drew himself up and bent over toward Ranek.

"You don't want to get on my shit list, do you?" His agitated breath flew into Ranek's face. His large hands groped under Ranek's back and tugged at his jacket.

"Hands off!" Ranek gasped.

"Half a one," Red said.

"All right . . . half a one . . . but let go of my jacket."

He now took the potato out of his pocket, divided it, and gave Red his half. He thought, Now he'll let you alone, finally. He closed his eyes. Red slid back into his place. For a while no sound came from his direction but munching and loud smacking of lips. But once he had forced down the raw potato he continued the conversation.

"What did you mean before . . . about the wetness?"

"As if someone had pissed here," said Ranek.

"I'm no bed wetter."

"It seemed to me as if . . ."

"It was Moishe's wife."

"You mean . . . she did under the stove . . ."

"No, she spilled a pot full of water."

"I see!"

"Hot water. Some of it spilled on me. Stupid bitch."

"Yes. That's tough."

"Told her off. Moishe heard it. He didn't interfere, though."

"Well . . ." Ranek could not remember Moishe very clearly.

"One of the card players . . . this Moishe . . . right?"

"Yes, before, when we still played cards here he always played with us. But that's all over now."

"Now I remember . . . sat with the others around the crate . . . at the window . . . evenings?"

Red did not reply at once. Ranek noticed that he lifted his head and it seemed to him as if he were staring at the window. Then Red's head slumped back.

"Moishe isn't one of us," he said softly.

"What do you mean?"

"He's a Prokover. Was born here. Would you believe it?"

"A real Prokover?"

"Yes . . . one of the few who are still around?"

"Does he speak Yiddish?"

"Yes, very well too. And his wife, very well."

Ranek tried to remember the wife, but he did not succeed.

"The wife hasn't been here for long," Red said suddenly, as

if he could guess Ranek's thoughts. "She had a cross to bear, that woman. You know the story?"

"No."

Red laughed softly. "That's one you have to hear. It's a good one."

"Not now," said Ranek. "I want to sleep now."

"Tomorrow, then," said Red. "I'll tell it to you tomorrow."

"All right," Ranek said. "You can tell it to me tomorrow."

"At breakfast," said Red. "We'll have breakfast together, won't we?"

"Yes," Ranek said because he wanted to be left alone.

Red giggled for a while. Then he calmed down. Soon after Ranek could hear him snore.

* * *

Someone moved heavily in the corner under the platform. A figure crawled awkwardly towards the stove. Suddenly it hunkered down beside Ranek.

Ranek did not move. He knew who it was: the teacher.

"Ranek!" a voice whispered. "Are you awake?"

"Yes, I'm awake," he said coldly. "What do you want?"

He felt the other one pushing a cigarette toward him.

"Thanks. Why are you doing that?"

"I would like to show my gratitude..." The voice broke off. Then after hesitating a few seconds, he continued shyly, "... because of my wife. Because of everything you did for her..." The voice broke off again. "It's not much," it whispered then, "... but I don't have anything else ... but if I can do something for you some other time ..."

Ranek stared silently at the man. A nauseating stench of sweat wafted toward him and he pictured the face to himself as he had seen it shortly before in the glow of the lamp: the spectacles... the weak mouth... the sparsely covered pate. I slept with your wife, he thought, if that's what you mean when you're grateful to me? I beat her and took everything she owned.

"The old woman told me everything," the man said softly, and repeated, "Everything you did for her—"

"There's one way you could show your gratitude," Ranek said guardedly.

"Go ahead, tell me."

"Your sleeping place is a double," Ranek said emphatically, "at least it was at one time, when your wife was still here—" He interrupted himself, coughing and laughing simultaneously for a few moments. Then he went on, "I can't stay under the stove. If you like we can sleep there together. It's a place for two people."

"That's impossible," said the man.

"Why?"

"Because there's not enough room."

"That's what the old woman said too. A rotten excuse."

"No excuse. I'll explain it to you. You knew the Steins, didn't you? Both of them died . . . first she, then he . . . right after my wife. Yes . . . first my wife and then the Steins."

"Really? I didn't know that," Ranek interrupted him. He was astonished.

"The businessman and his wife are gone too."

"Dead too?"

"No, they've moved. From the floor to the platform."

"Lucky bastards. Upstairs, in other words?"

"Yes. You see: five places became free. I got one of them. Four left over. You follow me, don't you?"

"Not quite."

"Five new ones took over the four empty places. Five from the street. Came in and flopped down."

"Yes," said Ranek.

"You understand now?"

"Yes."

"I would help you if there were a chance."

"There is one," whispered Ranek.

"But how?"

"You could give me back my old place and sleep under the stove instead."

"I can't do that."

"If you really wanted to . . ."

"That's asking too much."

Only now Ranek set up. "You seem to've forgotten what I did for your wife," he hissed. This time there was no answer. He repeated what he'd said, but his words died away in the dark.

* * *

He lay awake a long time. At first he had tried to think of Sarah, as if he were obliged to think of her one last time, but Sarah's face remained shapeless. Perhaps that's the way it's supposed to be, he thought. She didn't mean anything to you. He lit the cigarette the teacher gave him and blew smoke against the door. A few people were still talking, but eventually the entire room fell silent. Then came the moment when he no longer forced himself to think of Sarah. He thought of the bottle of schnapps which he'd exchange tomorrow and his mouth began to water. He thought of meat and eggs and a large loaf of black bread. And while falling asleep he thought of the good coffee his mother used to make.

He was dreaming of an early-morning hour at home. He was standing by the window and put on the phylactery. He did the same thing every morning . . . tie the tephillin . . . intone his morning prayers . . . then a quick breakfast that consisted of buttered rolls and coffee. He usually ate together with Deborah and his mother. . . and then he had to leave for work.

Today he would have breakfast with Mother and Deborah, since Father and Fred had already gone to the bakery. The kitchen door stood open. He heard feet busily pattering back and forth. He smelled the fresh coffee. Now a door opened outside. That would be Deborah, who had washed the steps leading to the kitchen from outside. He could hear Deborah's soft, melodic voice saying something to his mother.

After a while he heard his mother call, "Ranek, have you finished praying?"

"No, Mother."

"Hurry a little today . . . I won't tell Father."

"Yes, Mother."

"The coffee is made."

He smiled and called back, "Yes, I know . . . the coffee."

* * *

Upon awakening he butted his head against the stove leg. First located himself in the present.

As usual a musty stench pervaded the room. Ranek stuck his head out from under the stove, but when he noticed that the people were still asleep he lay back down again.

Red was awake. He slowly turned his head and stared at Ranek out of bloodshot eyes.

"Good morning," he said.

"Good morning," replied Ranek.

"Today's Sunday," snickered Red.

"How do you know?"

"Can't you hear anything?"

Ranek lay quietly and listened. "Yes," he said then, very softly, "I can hear it . . . church bells . . . very far away. That's coming from the other side, isn't it, from the Rumanian side of the river?"

2

Moishe—or the "Prokover," as some people called him—was a large black-haired man who was a head taller than most people in the sanctuary. He had an intelligent but uncommunicative face. Before the war he had been a foreman in one of the local iron foundries.

His wife had been washing laundry since early in the morning: a few woollen stockings, his long underpants, a scarf, and her transparent night-shirt, about which the people joked and which he had forbidden her to put on. She was standing on the platform and was in the process of attaching one end of the clothesline to a bent nail that stuck into the wall above her place

and on which his jacket hung. Moishe waited impatiently until she had finally tied a knot, then he shoved the bundle of wash to her. He did not take his eyes off her. He noticed that she was somewhat abstracted. She can't forget the brothel, he thought fiercely . . . all those months in the god-damned brothel.

Moishe's face looked very tired today, the deep shadows under his eyes indicating that he'd again spent half the night quarrelling with his wife.

Now she proceeded to hang out the wash; because she was pregnant she moved awkwardly . . . a sight that filled him with nausea; still, he didn't turn his head away but kept watching her doggedly. Now he thought back to the day he had decided to send her to the brothel. It had been shortly after the invasion, in late summer of 1941. The Rumanian Jews hadn't arrived yet and the girls in the brothel were all from the town itself and the neighbouring villages. He could remember clearly the awful scenes his wife had made, the hideous tears and suicide threats. It was true, she had always been a good wife to him; she had cooked and washed and darned his socks and nursed him when he was sick. She had been a virgin when he married her and she had never been unfaithful to him . . . yes, she had been a good wife, cook, washerwoman, nurse, and mattress. One couldn't have asked for more. She hadn't deserved what he had asked her to do, but that was the war's fault and the fault of the hunger, this god-damned hunger. He hadn't been able to stand the hunger.

It had not been easy to have his wife accepted at the brothel. She had been neither pretty nor young, and there were so many pretty young girls who would have given anything to go there. You needed protection and good connections . . . Moishe still had good connections at that time and he had found her a position. The brothel was a good place. You could get all the bread you wanted there. His wife had finally seen his point.

Every day he had walked up and down in front of the brothel. Sometimes he had to wait for hours until his wife showed her face at the window upstairs . . . until she opened the window and tossed down a small package of food.

The face at the window up there had become fatter from day to day. However, in time he had been able to detect a slight increase in his weight too. As far as he was concerned this was an indication that he and his wife were very well off and that they had every reason to be thankful for their fate, for they would be able to survive the war in this way.

But not everything had gone as smoothly as it had looked at first. She became pregnant. And one day when she could no longer hide her condition she had been put out on the street. Then she had come to him.

Now she climbed awkwardly down from the platform, fetched a little sack with food in it, placed a dirty towel over the edge of the platform, emptied the contents of the little sack out on it, and started to prepare the breakfast. He watched her a while longer. His moodiness soon turned into hatred; a hatred that was not directed against her, because what she had done had been his fault... and besides, she'd brought a nice chunk of money with her, enough to buy bread for several months. His hatred was directed against the child in her womb: the bastard child.

He thought to himself, The god-damned bastard. He'd have to beat her on her fat stomach again one of these nights so that she'd get rid of it.

* * *

"Do you see... over there... the pregnant one... that's Moishe's wife." Red laughed. And then he told Ranek the story about the bastard child. It seemed to give him an unholy pleasure. His eyes glistened maliciously. Ranek listened without interest. He only asked after a while, "Why is she wearing Sarah's dress?"

"Sarah's husband sold it to her cheap."

Ranek nodded. He said, "Oh well."

"Sarah was completely naked when they dragged her out," Red said. "You should've seen her."

"I'm glad I didn't."

* * *

Benny and Leo Gottschalk lay right under the window; their faces looked waxen even though they weren't dead yet. Both of them were still young; they had blond hair and light-coloured eyes and looked like twins. No one knew which of them would die first. Some of the people had laid bets; most of them had bet on Benny.

Ranek, who stood beside them and was staring at them in his disparaging manner felt a stinging in his eyeballs after a time . . . and then again the familiar dizziness; he had to hold onto the window sill. The shrivelled faces of the half-dead brothers became so blurred it seemed to him that what he saw on the floor were not two faces but only skin and hair. "The one closest to the platform is Leo . . . the other's Benny," someone had said to him before. "Want to place a bet on who's going to go first?"

"No," he had answered.

He shuffled back to the stove to fry the rest of the potatoes he had in his pocket. Those two aren't going to last much longer, he thought. They'll be dragged out in no time at all, first one, then the other. He would keep his eyes open. He would take the first place that became free. The old woman was right. He didn't have to suffer much longer under the kitchen stove.

3

Last evening, even before he came back to the sanctuary, Ranek had taken his bottle of schnapps to Dvorsky, who had shown no interest. You'll find someone, he was thinking now while he checked the cork stopper. The cork held firm. He stuck the bottle into his jacket pocket and left the room.

He looked for Hofer as he was shuffling downstairs. He could not see him anywhere. He noticed the old woman by the front door and stopped beside her. She looked unwashed and dishevelled. He gathered from the way she smelled that she must

have just come back from the lavatory. Sunlight played over her face; he had never fully realized until now how ravaged she looked.

"Did you see the man I brought along yesterday?" he asked her.

"I saw him leave."

"Too bad. I thought he'd stay."

"He'll be back."

"How do you know?"

"Sigi offered him a place on the platform."

"But nobody has died?"

"No, that's true. But Sigi talked to a few people and convinced them that it would be a good thing to have a doctor in the house. The people will make room for him somehow, they'll just have to move even closer together."

"I'm glad," said Ranek. "How bright of Sigi!" He touched his hat and wanted to pass by the old woman, but she suddenly held him back.

"Wait," she said quickly, "there's something I have to tell you. I'd almost forgotten all about it."

"Well, what?" he asked indifferently.

"Yesterday morning somebody came here and asked for you."

"A man?"

"No . . . a woman." The old woman took a deep breath as if she knew the importance of the news she was communicating to him, and then she told him, "The woman has been in Prokov only a very short time. She told me that she asked for you all over town and finally got your address at Lupu's coffeehouse. I told her you didn't live here any more . . . that they'd caught you . . . how could I know you'd pop up again the same day . . . ?"

"Why didn't you tell me yesterday?" he asked, and he thought to himself, Who can that be? And for some reason he was afraid to ask.

"I forgot it, I told you I forgot it."

"Yes, of course," he said, confused.

"The woman said she'd come back." The old woman suddenly

lowered her voice to a whisper : "She refused to believe that . . . that you'd been caught . . . She simply wouldn't believe it."

Now he asked haltingly, "Did she give her name?"

"Your sister-in-law," said the old woman.

He gave her a startled, unbelieving stare.

"A young woman," she said, "young with dark hair. Has a delicate face, just like—" She tried to find the right expression but didn't succeed. Suddenly she started to giggle. "You'll know if it's her, won't you?"

"Deborah," he said softly.

"Your face has turned all grey," whispered the old woman.

"It can't be her," he stammered, "it's not possible."

"Nothing is impossible," the old woman insisted. It struck her how his figure, which had been all crumpled and slack, suddenly taunted. "Deborah is dead," he said now, "all of them are dead, Deborah and the rest of my family."

His voice became cold. "It's a case of mistaken identity."

The old woman silently shook her head; a sympathetic smile played over her lips. She thought, It always takes time for someone to get something like this through his head.

"They were all shot because of truancy," he said coldly.

"Truancy?" she asked astonished.

"They refused to let themselves be deported. They hid for quite a few days. That's what the authorities call truancy."

"Yes. I understand . . . one of the usual perversions of language." She asked, "Where was your family hidden?"

"In the cellar of my father's house."

"Were you with them when they were shot?"

"No."

"Where were you?"

"Hidden too. But not at home. At a friend's place."

"And when you were caught . . . ?"

"Well, I was someone they didn't stand up against a wall," he interrupted her curtly, because he noticed at once what she was getting at. "They also made exceptions . . . they only took me to the railway station." He added icily, "But I know what happened to Deborah and the others."

"From hearsay?" asked the old woman, smiling.

He nodded. "Ours was a small town," he said, "and something like that gets around fast. I heard about it at the station."

* * *

The news began to take effect once he was alone on the street. He did not notice where he was going, he was so wrapped up in his thoughts, and for a time it seemed to him as if he were striding through high halls whose marble walls resounded with the agonising echoes of the past. His heart throbbed. The street floated in a mist, as so often, but this time only . . . because his eyes had become moist.

It came back to him now what the old woman had said yesterday: "You know . . . so many people are coming into the ghetto these days looking for their relatives, people who were deported, disappeared or were presumed dead . . . one day they suddenly pop up again . . . and when you meet them it really seems as if you were meeting someone from a mass grave who stands there in front of you and asks, 'Do you by any chance know my wife? Or my sister? She has such and such a colour hair . . . she's about that tall . . .'"

While he was walking farther and farther along the ruined street he gradually became calmer. His doubts were too strong. His sense of the possible regained control over him. The old woman lied, he thought. That's it. Of course there are a lot of people who pop up again out of nowhere, like Sarah's husband, for example. But that was something altogether different. He had only disappeared; Sarah never heard anything authentic. But you *know* what happened to Deborah!

He shook his head and spat fiercely on the ground. A damned old busybody she is, that Levy woman, he thought furiously.

How did she even know he had a sister-in-law? Of course: you told Sarah. And the old woman overheard. That's how she knew. And she made fun of you. And you, numbskull, let someone like that make a fool of you!

He felt all right again. No, he thought, don't indulge in

sentimentalities. You can't afford that. The old woman kidded you. Deborah is dead. They're all dead. Forget about it.

Now he paid attention to the street again. He crossed an intersection, turned into a small side street, walked straight ahead for a while, turned left, entered a similar side street, turned off once again, and then went straight ahead once more. He encountered a few peasant women who were carrying large straw baskets and who walked more quickly than he did. The baskets were covered. He noticed a man waving from a gate, whereupon one of the peasant women stopped hesitantly, suddenly turned around, and disappeared behind the gate, the same gate at which the man had stood only a moment ago.

He felt biting hunger pangs even though he had had breakfast. For a time he followed the rest of the peasant women, his mouth watering, and struggled with the thought of talking to them, offering them the bottle of schnapps in exchange for one of their baskets. He tried to walk more quickly, his eyes fixed on the women's broad behinds; it seemed to him as if they were hovering in front of him. Panting, he started to run. Suddenly he saw a militiaman came around a corner, and he slowed down again. No, he thought, not on the open street, that's too risky.

The women vanished. Farther up along the street a well-known monument appeared in sight. Well, now you know where you are, he thought . . . that's the Lenin monument. As he was about to walk by it he could not help stopping for a moment to stare into the gutter, the gutter where during the night, that night which he would never forget, a dead man had lain, a dead man and a walking stick. And he himself had stood at practically the same spot as now and had held a stranger, a woman in his arms . . . a woman from the streets . . . someone who had followed him in the rain. And the woman had smelled good. The way women are supposed to smell.

* * *

Yesterday evening, when he and Hofer had come back from the bridge construction, Hofer had given him a couple of

cigarettes. He had smoked them on the way home. Hofer is a decent fellow, he thought.

He remembered that evening now: they had worked the entire day. Just before they were to go back to their barracks, one of the overseers had motioned to them, whereupon he and Hofer had climbed down the pier and gone back to the riverbank to take another load of wood across. It was the last load of the day that they saw pitching and tossing on a horse-drawn cart toward the barracks camp. It was already getting dark. When they were finished unloading, Hofer drew him to the side. It was almost night. They knew that no one was watching them. The soldier who stood guard at the riverbank had ambled to the barracks, perhaps to relieve himself. The others were still on the bridge. The Ukrainian driver was not watching them either; he was busy harnessing the horse.

Hofer and he quickly climbed into the empty cart and lay down under a few loose boards. The darkness protected them. Later, as the cart was leaving the vicinity of the labour camp, they jumped off. In a very roundabout way they sneaked back into the ghetto.

"Where are you going to go now?" Hofer asked him.

"Back to the sanctuary," Ranek said. "Where else?"

"Will you walk a little farther with me?"

"It's too late."

"We've broken the curfew, anyway."

"Yes."

"I hid a few cigarettes in my room. Half of them are yours. I could also give them to you tomorrow."

"No, better do it now," Ranek laughed. "I'll go with you. How far is it?"

"Not very far."

When they reached Hofer's living quarters, Ranek pulled up short. He knew that house. It was painted a glaring red.

"You know," he said softly to Hofer, "I once stood here in the rain and stared up at the first floor. A good warm light was glowing in that window. A pity I didn't know you then. I . . . I had no roof over my head at the time."

Hofer nodded. "Wait here," he said.

Ranek did not have to wait long. When Hofer returned his face looked frightened. "There's typhus in the house," he said.

"Tough luck," Ranek said.

Hofer gave him the promised cigarettes and grinned weakly. "I'd hidden them well, as you can see . . ."

"Thanks."

"Do you know of a place where I can sleep?"

Ranek nodded. "Come back to the sanctuary," he said. "Perhaps there's a place free there."

* * *

Ranek was now walking in the direction of the red house. Hofer's sure to be there, he thought, taking care of the sick. Hofer had told him yesterday that he had a good friend there, a certain Dr Goldberg, who had typhus himself and to whom he intended to bring some food until he could take care of himself again. Hofer's bound to be there, Ranek thought, if for no other reason.

He stuck his hand into his jacket pocket and felt the bottle of schnapps. It would be good if he met Hofer there. He would know someone to whom he could sell the damned schnapps; Hofer really got around everywhere and knew more people than anyone else. Yes, he was doing the right thing. First look up Hofer! After all . . . what did he have to lose? There was still plenty of time to go to the Bazaar if Hofer couldn't help him.

Ranek noticed that a few passers-by turned their heads to take a second look at him. Because the neck of the bottle is sticking out of the pocket, he thought. You should hide it better! You're going to get into trouble yet. It could enter somebody's head to report you. Watch out! he thought, and held both hands protectively over the pocket. He walked slowly, frequently looking back to check whether there were any more militiamen around.

Finally he saw the red house. It rose like a brand new building from among the ruins. The wide gate of the house was closed.

When he was only a few paces away, the gate was opened from inside, and he saw a man with a tilted sports cap emerge.

Ranek was heading straight for the gate. Now the man with the sports cap had noticed him. He pulled up short, blocking his way.

"Got something to sell?" he asked, snooping inquisitively as Ranek wanted to pass by.

Ranek stopped and looked suspiciously at the man. No need to be afraid of him, he thought.

"I mean the bottle," the man said, pointing at Ranek's pocket.

"Yes, that's for sale."

"Anything in it?"

"Schnapps."

The man pushed his cap back and forth on his head, not saying anything, eyeing him maliciously all the while.

"Schnapps," Ranek repeated, "you can have it cheap."

"Thought it was oil," the man said, disappointed. "Looks like an oil bottle." He hesitated. "Tell me the truth: there's oil in the bottle, right?"

"No."

"Liar."

Ranek retreated a step. His glance rested silently on the shabby face with the tilted cap. No need to be afraid of that fellow, he thought. He's the type that likes quarrelling because he is so bored.

Carefully and with measured emphasis he said, "Shithead!"

The man nodded and grinned; he tugged at his cap again. Ranek now tried walking past the man, but the man held him back. "Don't be in such a rush," he said. "There's an epidemic in the house."

"I know," said Ranek.

"On the first floor. In the front room. Typhus! Packed in like sardines. I just wanted to warn you."

"Yes, thanks. I know."

"Have relatives up there yourself, eh?"

"Yes," he lied.

The man scratched himself sympathetically.

"Your mother?" he asked.

"My uncle," answered Ranek, grinning.

"So . . . an uncle," the man said. "With me it's my father."

"Is he making good progress?"

The man grinned again. "Every half hour I have a look to see how far he is. But he's tough, you know. And he's got the appetite of a pregnant woman. Funny, eh? With fever like that."

"Yes."

"I don't go in the room myself. I'm not crazy—and get myself infected. I stay outside by the door and whistle. The old man comes crawling up to me and I shove his food in to him through a crack in the door."

While he spoke he kept staring at Ranek's pocket. Suddenly he lunged toward Ranek and tried to pull out the bottle. Ranek slapped him sharply on the hand. The man shied back and laughed. "Oh, I just wanted to see whether it's really schnapps. Why do you want to fool me like that? You don't look like someone who can afford to trade in schnapps. I'm positive it's oil." He went on blithely, "You see I need oil. I have a sack full of potatoes at home. I could boil them of course, but home fries are tastier. It's always like that," he said, smirking. "If there's a death in the family I always get the appetite for some delicacy, he, he, he . . . so, do you sell the oil—"

Ranek shoved him aside and disappeared in the hallway.

On the first floor there was a circular lobby. The living room to the left of the stairway was open; he could hear healthy, vigorous voices coming from there. Not here, he thought, it has to be the other one. He opened the second door, the one to his right, entered a narrow hallway whose floor was covered with worn-out linoleum, noticed three locked doors, and stopped hesitantly.

He had no difficulty deciding which room faced the front. He opened the door just wide enough to stick his head inside: a bare room. A few iron beds without mattresses with four or five men in each of them. No platform, no kitchen range, merely a small, cold stove in the middle of the room. Through the bare window you looked at the ruins on the opposite side of the

street . . . the ruins and a section of pale sky. He looked around for Hofer. Hofer wasn't there.

* * *

He spent the rest of the day at the Bazaar but found no one who wanted the schnapps at his price. Toward evening he left this bustling plaza to make one last desperate attempt at the coffeehouse. On his way there . . . on the Pushkinskaja . . . he became dizzy. He sat down on the kerb for a few moments to rest. When he got on his feet again he felt so miserable he decided to go straight home.

4

A young woman was standing on the street in front of the sanctuary. She had been standing there for more than an hour. She had not moved once. The people coming home from town in the evening paid no attention to her. A stranger, some of them thought, shrugging their shoulders, someone who's waiting for someone.

The woman lifted her head as she saw Ranek approach. She recognized him at once, even though he looked completely different. She wanted to run towards him, but her legs suddenly refused to cooperate. She stopped where she stood and only spread her arms wide open, breaking out into a loud sob.

* * *

Ranek wiped his mouth. "Excuse me for vomiting," he said, "no need to be frightened . . ." He coughed with embarrassment. "My stomach, you know, can't quite take it any longer. I am sick at the slightest provocation . . . and now with all the excitement . . ."

He did not know what to say to her. It's too much all at once, he thought, and then, Why doesn't she say something? Why is she crying all the time?

"I'm no longer the same Ranek," he started again. "A little changed." He grinned and wiped the back of his hand over his mouth. Just wait until she's calmed down, he thought.

Finally, after a period of complete silence, he said, "Someone told me that you were here . . . and idiot that I am, I didn't believe it."

"Do you believe it now? she asked, smiling through her tears. These were her first stuttered words of greeting.

"Yes, Deborah," he said softly.

"How did you know I was in Prokov?" he asked then.

"I didn't know anything definite, but I was told that many people from Litesty were taken to Prokov . . . and so I thought that you might . . ."

"Yes, I understand . . . That's how we find each other again. That's how it is. We're not the only ones."

"You haven't asked about the parents."

Ranek flinched. He did not answer her at once and only thought, She only mentions the parents. But nothing about Fred. Why?

"So you know?"

"I know it now," he said. "I can tell from looking at you . . . Tell me, Deborah! Where were they murdered? In the cellar?"

"No. Not in the cellar. They were taken out of the cellar and then . . . and then—" Her voice snapped and broke off.

"Tell me!"

"Oh, Ranek!"

"Where were they murdered?" he asked mercilessly.

"Behind the bakery . . . down by the canal," she whispered with a choked voice.

"Were they tortured long?"

"No, Ranek . . . it went quickly."

They stared at each other, as though looking for something in each other's face. Then it was he again who interrupted the oppressive silence with his hoarse voice.

"Where were you the whole time...since October forty-one?"

"In Schargorod...in Kopaigorod...in Obodovka...last of all in the Bershad ghetto."

"So...in Bershad too?"

"Yes, there too."

"Did you come here illegally or with forged papers?"

"Illegally." Suddenly she said, "Fred's alive!"

"Fred? Why didn't you tell me at once...?"

"I couldn't tell you everything at once."

"Of course."

"They didn't kill the two of us. Why? There's no explaining that, Ranek. Perhaps because we were still young and good enough to be used for forced labour later on. Or perhaps...because they wanted to conserve ammunition. Who knows?"

"There's no explanation. You're right. There are no explanations whatsoever."

"You are astonished, aren't you, that Fred is not with me now?"

"Yes."

"We were deported together, Fred and I...on the same day that Mother and Father were shot. We were together all the time after that...everywhere...all the time...and we also came to Prokov together."

"In that case...where is he?"

"In the hospital. Typhus."

"You shouldn't have let him into the hospital!" he stammered.

"Day before yesterday when we arrived here...we were camping along the street...and Fred had a high fever and was attracting attention."

"Nonetheless you shouldn't have..."

"I didn't want to...I didn't want to leave him. But then the police. They ripped him out of my hands. And then they dragged him there."

"The hospital is a cemetery," he said softly, "no one's got healthy there, no one's ever come back from there."

"I know," she said.

"Your voice is so calm all of a sudden."

"We'll take him out of the hospital tonight," she said suddenly.

"That's impossible."

"I was there. I bribed one of the attendants, the one who's on night duty. It's all set."

"Deborah?"

"Don't ask me any questions now. We'll talk about everything later on. Do you trust me?"

He nodded silently. The ideas she has, he thought . . . to take Fred out of the hospital . . . in the middle of the night . . . why, that's insane.

She put her arm into his. While they walked across the street to the fence he felt his knees becoming wobbly; for seconds everything around him dissolved into fog, he staggered slightly. He felt that he was suddenly completely alone, but then he felt the gentle pressure of her hands, and he looked at her and said, "It's all right, Deborah."

The street again seemed filled with mist; the dusk had veiled the rubble landscape in a grey light and concealed it like a carefully protected secret. Single shadows swooped across the sanctuary yard; muffled laughter from the lavatory resounded in the street.

"Come into the yard!" she said.

"Later on," he said.

"We're the only ones still on the street!"

"Wait a moment! There are too many people in the vard now. It's better if they don't see me bring you inside. Otherwise there'll be a stink."

Only now it occurred to him that he had to find a place for her. But where? He did not even have a place to sleep himself. If only he had a few potatoes, he might be able to trade with Red! But he had nothing. And then: even if Red gave him credit this time and let Deborah sleep under the stove . . . could he take the responsibility for that . . . ? No, he thought, you won't let her sleep under the stove! The best thing is we both stay in the hallway.

They walked along the fence, reached the end of it, turned around and walked back.

"We'll go inside when it's dark," he said.

"Yes, Ranek." She stroked his arm. She placed her cheek against his shoulder.

"Are you glad that you're here?" he asked huskily.

"If you only knew how we looked for you," she said gently, "first in Schargorod when new transports arrived . . . and later on . . . in every new place. Fred said every time it was useless, we wouldn't find you. But I never lost faith."

"There's much we have to say to each other, Deborah."

"So very much," she said.

They had stopped. Deborah was leaning against the fence and was waiting for him to tell his story, but again he could not find the right words. His hard mouth remained closed. All he did was step a little closer and gaze silently into her face, examining it. Her dark hair was smooth and combed backward and tied in a simple knot . . . the way she had always worn her hair . . . before the war. Her face was completely emaciated. She had never been heavy. But these pointed cheekbones and the deep hollows underneath . . . she had never had those. And yet . . . the longer he looked at her the more he gained the impression that her face hadn't changed at all. How was that possible? And then, suddenly, he knew why. It was the inner expression of her face that had remained unchanged, which the war, the hardship, and the injustices she had endured had been unable to extinguish.

He remembered his father once saying jokingly, "Deborah looks like a saint." He had made the remark during supper and had almost choked with laughter. Ranek recollected that his father had laughed for a while, as was his wont, and that he had picked the bones out of a piece of cold carp with his fat fingers.

"Why're you staring at me like that?" she said, interrupting his thoughts. "Do I frighten you? Have I aged that much?"

* * *

They were sitting on the stairs. It was pitch dark.

They had told each other what had happened during the last few months. They had both been brief—the details were too horrible to go into at great length. It was only important that the two now knew the most essential things about each other.

They sat close together, not saying anything. The last people were returning from the lavatory and stumbled quickly and fearfully, haunted by the darkness as by a childhood phantom, up the stairs. The door kept being opened and closed. Then, when all were in the room, it became quiet in the hallway.

Later on the door was opened once more. It was Sigi. Sigi placed himself against the bannister upstairs and pissed down into the hallway.

When he was gone again, Ranek whispered, "He's got a bad habit. One should break him of that."

"Who's that?"

"Sigi."

"I see," she said indifferently.

"I don't know whether he saw you."

"That's all the same. The others must have seen me too . . . before, when they came upstairs."

"Yes, but they didn't recognize you."

He asked, "Do you have something to eat?"

"Yes, a slice of bread."

"We can eat it now."

"We have the whole night ahead of us."

"I think we should now . . ."

"If you want to," she said.

She split the bread with him. They ate in silence.

"We'll get underway at midnight," she suddenly said. "Rest a little. Sleep if you can."

"And you?"

"I'm not tired."

"Are you too excited?"

"I'm not tired," she said again.

Well, she just won't admit it, he thought. You know what she's like, that's the way she is.

"Wouldn't it be better if we waited until it got light?"

"No. We can get Fred only at night. It's too noticeable in daytime. Besides, the attendant who wants to help us is there only at night; but I explained all of that to you before!"

"I just thought..." He corrected himself: "Does it have to be right at midnight?"

"He said shortly after midnight! He'll have a good reason for that."

"You know what's in store for us if they catch us in the street at night?"

"We'll just have to watch out."

"We're finished if we're caught."

"I know."

"Aren't you afraid?"

"Yes and no."

"What do you mean?"

"The fear goes away when I think of what's at stake."

"Yes, I understand. But is it worth it?"

"Ranek! How can you ask something like that? It's your brother who's at stake."

And your husband, he thought.

"It's your brother who's at stake," she repeated tonelessly.

"Excuse me," he said, ashamed. Suddenly he had to think of Seidel. He had let his brother starve to death! What would Seidel have done in his place now? The idea amused him... and he could not keep from uttering a brief, hoarse laugh.

"What were you thinking of?"

"Oh, nothing."

She reached for his hand and stroked it. "You shouldn't doubt, Ranek. Fred cares for you. He would have done the same for you."

* * *

He bedded his head in her lap and pushed his hat over his eyes. However, he could not fall asleep. So Deborah had been present when Father and Mother had been shot. She had seen all of it. With her own eyes.

He tried to picture the scene, which she had not described but only suggested to him. He did not succeed. All he could see was the canal. Nothing but the canal. He saw the filthy, lazily flowing water with swarms of flies and gnats over it and he could hear it rush softly past behind the bakery.

After a time he heard Deborah's gentle voice : "You're excited too, aren't you?"

"I'm not tired," he said, smiling, "just like you . . . not tired."

"Were you thinking of him?"

"Of Fred?"

She nodded.

"Yes," he lied. Suddenly he grasped her arm because he had remembered something. "You told me you bribed the attendant, but you didn't tell me with what."

"I gave him some money."

"Much?"

"Not much."

"Did you give him everything you had?"

"It wasn't much," she repeated. She added, "But Fred still has a little money. I sewed it into his trousers . . . some time ago . . . on the way to Obodovka."

"That was bright."

"I sewed it in well. No one will find it."

They fell silent again.

He sat upright for a while because his back hurt from leaning against the worn-out dented stair . . . then, when the pain eased, he lay back again and rested his head on her lap. He felt the soft flesh of her thighs again; he felt it through the thin dress, and this wonderful, warm flow of human warmth, which he had ignored in his confusion before, soothed him now and made him feel grateful and at peace.

He had the feeling that her eyes were resting on his face, but it was too dark to find out . . . perhaps she was only staring at the black steps . . . or perhaps out into the night?

5

While they were walking through the dark ghetto, a tower clock chimed in the distance. It was midnight now. The clock ceased its tolling, but the sound continued to resound in their ears for a long time, and it seemed to them that the echoes hovered mysteriously above the dead landscape, the black river, and the unpeopled streets.

"That comes from the other part of town," he said, "the part we aren't allowed to enter." He added softly, "Too bad that we don't have something like that... I mean... a tower clock."

"There aren't any real houses left here," she said, "and you'd like to have a tower clock."

"As long as I hear the time being tolled I know I'm alive."

"But we can hear it!"

"Not always... only now... because it is so quiet."

"It is quiet," she said, "it is very quiet."

"This morning I heard church bells," he whispered. "They always ring on Sunday. They're louder. You can even hear them at the sanctuary."

"Are they also... from the other part of town?"

"No," he said. "There are no churches left over there."

"Where did the bells ring?"

"On the other side of the Dniester."

"What's over there... a city or a village?"

"A village," he said. "You can't see it. It lies hidden behind the hills."

She was just about to ask, What's the name of the village? when Ranek stopped short. "Someone's coming!" he whispered. He came alive again. He took her arm and they stumbled across the dark street to the ditch. "In there!" he hissed. They clambered into the ditch and lay down flat in it so they could not be seen.

Steps came closer... voices became loud. A few men approached along the street. After they had passed, Ranek got up, trembling. "Why is one always so afraid right away?" he stammered. He helped her out of the ditch. "Damned bastards!"

"The important thing is that they didn't see us."

"Yes."

"They talked Rumanian."

"They weren't Rumanians."

"What then?"

"Jewish police. They always talk Rumanian when they're on duty."

"At night," she said.

"Come on!" he said.

"Do you think something's going on again?"

"How do I know? Come on. We've got to hurry."

They now walked close to the ditch, ready to throw themselves into it at the first suspicious noise. But no one was coming their way.

"Are you sure there's no guard in front of the hospital?"

"He said there was none."

"Who's keeping watch in that case?"

"The police come by every so often."

"And otherwise?"

"... only attendants. They're in charge there."

"That's just like the Rumanians."

"But it's only a hospital for civilians."

"Of course," he said, grinning.

"You know what the attendant said?"

"How should I know?"

"He said, 'No one here who can run away.'"

They did not have to go much farther. Presently they entered

a small alley that ran steeply uphill. The hospital was at the top of the hill. This alley had no name, either.

They walked uphill, breathing heavily. It had become lighter in the meantime; the clouds had parted and the moon showered its mild light into the narrow alley. The hospital was surrounded by a low wall covered with broken coloured glass. At the gate there hung a wooden board with "Jewish Hospital" written on it in chalk.

* * *

They waited a few minutes in the deserted alley in front of the gate and listened intently for steps approaching inside the yard. When the silence was not broken and no one came, Deborah stuck her hand carefully between the crack in the wooden gate until her fingers reached the latch; she shoved back and then pushed the door open. "Come!" she whispered.

They stepped through the gate and closed it again.

Ranek looked anxiously around: a long, gravel-covered yard churned up by numerous wheels; at the back of the yard stood two low, shed-like buildings; a bluish light penetrated through their blacked-out windows. Ripped mattresses lay along the length of one side of the yard, parts of iron beds, rolls of barbed wire, and a pushcart that was tipped over on its side. He also noticed that the iron gate was covered with white tiles on the inside, a colour that glistened like quicksilver in the moonlight, and that an elderberry bush bloomed in the corner by the wall—like a piece of nature that had strayed here by accident.

"He said to wait behind that bush."

"Do you think he'll come?"

"Yes, he'll come for sure."

"And if it's only a trap?"

"Don't be afraid. It's no trap."

They stepped behind the bush. They stood close together, both leaning with their backs against the wall.

"Don't be afraid," she said again.

"Yes," he said, even though he felt his limbs had stiffened

with fear. You couldn't walk a single step now if you had to, he thought . . . but there's no need to tell her that.

"Did you see the two sheds?"

"Of course," he said.

"Yes, that's what they call a hospital."

Suddenly she nudged him. "There! You see, there he is."

"The attendant?"

"Yes."

A man had stepped out of the larger of the two sheds and was walking slowly toward the other shed. In one hand he was carrying a bucket that he kept swinging back and forth; in the other he held either a long broom or a stick—it was impossible to tell at this distance. The door of the large shed had been left open and a hideous stench was being blown toward them from that direction.

When the attendant had disappeared again, she said, "The corpses are in the large shed."

"Smelled that long ago."

"In the large one, of all places."

"The dead have more rights than the living," he said bitterly, "or is that news to you?"

"No," she said.

"They are always treated with much more consideration; they can even sleep on the street at night without being punished for it . . . only we aren't allowed to."

"Listening to you it almost sounds as if you envied them."

He nodded and tugged pensively at his hat. Then he said softly, "We envy the dead . . . and yet, when it comes right down to it, no one wants to die. Why are we so attached to life?"

"Because we haven't given up hope yet," she said.

"We have given it up, Deborah!"

"No, Ranek. Otherwise we wouldn't fight so desperately for our naked existence. As long as you fight you have hope."

"Perhaps it is the way you say. But even if it is that way—surely only because we deceive ourselves."

"No, Ranek. We just have to wait and be patient. Everything will work out for the best. For us too."

She now lifted her face up to him and he saw how pale she was. Her eyes glistened. He again looked at her for a long time. She is not afraid he thought, shaking his head; she is calm and full of confidence. He felt the certainty that emanated from her slight body beginning to affect him, and gradually his fear ebbed away.

The bush hides us completely, he thought, feeling calmer now. Even if the police should come they'll hardly see us here. And then: the attendant will call us soon. Probably still has something else to do.

"Deborah . . . I wanted to ask you something before," he whispered. "It keeps troubling me . . . I can't understand it."

"Do ask me," she said gently. "You know I keep no secrets from you."

"How did Fred manage to come all the way from Bershad in his condition? I know . . . you came on foot!"

"He was still well when we started off: We slept mostly in barns and animal pens . . . with other refugees . . . and there . . . there he was infected."

"In other words . . . only on the way?"

"Yes, Ranek."

"And what happened then?"

"He got a very high fever. He walked a little way. Then he broke down."

"Close to your goal?"

"It wasn't far from Prokov."

"But the last stretch . . . after he gave up, how could he . . . ? So you drove after all?"

"No. With what? We stayed off the streets. In the woods."

"You don't expect me to believe that he pulled himself together and walked on?"

He noticed how she suddenly hesitated, but he refused to let himself be distracted now and persisted with his questions. "The last stretch?"

"I carried him."

"You're much too weak for that."

"Fred doesn't weigh much any more," she said tonelessly.

"Still. You can't walk three steps with him on your back."

Again she hesitated with her answer. She doesn't like to speak about it, he thought, let her be. He swallowed a gob of spit and kept looking at her. He didn't know himself why he suddenly felt the desire to say something ugly.

"In your place I would have left him by the wayside." He grinned maliciously. "Every normal person would have done that."

"Why, Ranek?"

"Because it is the only sensible thing to do in a situation like that."

"That's no explanation."

"All right. One can't help thinking, can one? I for one would have said to myself, That's impossible. That's too much for you! You'll never get there with him, even if you try carrying him piggyback. So, leave him there. It's obvious. People are sensible."

"I was so afraid for him that I didn't even get a chance to think," she said. "When he fell down I simply picked him up and walked on with him."

"Simply walked on with him," he murmured without comprehension. He tried to picture to himself how she had carried him, and he could see how often she must have stumbled and broken down herself and got up again, and how she had used up her last strength carrying him . . . as far as Prokov. It's almost unimaginable, he thought, but you know she isn't lying. If she says so, then it was like that.

"How were you able to do it?"

"I prayed," it came softly.

"While you were carrying him?"

"Yes . . . the entire time . . . prayed. The first few steps were difficult and I could hardly stand on my legs, but when I started to pray it became easier and easier. It was so easy all of a sudden, Ranek, and I could have carried him much farther if I had had to . . . much farther. God heard me."

"I don't know whether he heard you," Ranek said with a smile, "but I know one thing: you experienced him. That is a great deal already, Deborah . . . you know . . . if you can exper-

ience God . . . how many people can still do that?"

He now looked in the direction of the shed, but nothing could be seen of the attendant. His restless eyes then swooped back to the gate . . . to the street. Nothing moved there either.

Suddenly he started to laugh, his hoarse, joyless laugh that rose up like a rasp deep out of his chest. "You haven't changed," he said. "I thought so all along."

He stepped into the bush, the twigs pushing his hat onto the back of his neck, like human hands that knew his habits. A few minutes he half-cowered, staring at the silent yard, and he thought, You can tell her about it, you can tell her about it, there's nothing to it. Slowly he turned around again and stepped back to her by the wall.

"Some time ago I dreamed of you," he said with a weak grin. "It still happens sometimes, you know . . . that I dream."

"Only of me?"

"Yes, only of you. Of no one else. You were sitting at the piano, playing. It was the Sabbath. You said to me, There is no more Sabbath . . . and no law; He died then . . . I asked you, Who? You said, God." He interrupted himself. Then he continued softly, "But you can't have said that. I must be confused."

She was silent. She did not know whether he was making fun of her or whether he was serious.

"No, you couldn't have said that," he murmured. "Otherwise you could never have experienced God. You can experience God only if you don't doubt Him."

She saw him grimace maliciously again. He took a deep breath as if he was afraid of having a choking fit and to pump his lungs full of air. Then he pressed it out between his chapped lips: "People like you refuse to give up. They still have faith even when they're eating nothing but dirt and sawdust."

"Why are you telling me all that?"

"God will always be there for you," he said bitterly, "only for someone like me He is dead and buried."

"Stop talking nonsense," she said, her voice trembling.

Again they heard the tower clock chime in the other part of the town; a single thin note scattered in the air, indicating the

half hour that had become part of eternity. Suddenly they turned around with a start. Crunching steps on the gravel. "Finally," Deborah whispered. The attendant came directly toward the bush. He was a blond Ukrainian with a thick head and a bullish neck. "Come on now!" he called out in a muffled voice in Ukrainian. She stepped out from behind the bushes. It's a good thing you've learned that bloody language, Ranek thought. "Can we take him at once?" Deborah asked, also in Ukrainian.

"Yes . . . immediately." He pointed at Ranek.

"He's all right," Deborah said quickly, "he's helping me."

The man nodded calmly. Then he turned around. He walked ahead, the two of them following him at his heels.

The man led them into the room for the dead. As they entered the stench took their breath away. A long rope dangled from the ceiling with a small kerosene lamp attached to it. On the floor there were piles upon piles of corpses: men, women, and children, a confusion of naked bodies and dishevelled hair.

"They put your husband in here by mistake." The man turned to Deborah by way of an explanation. "Wasn't my fault. Happened towards evening, before I came on duty."

The man bent down clumsily and picked up a pail that stood by the threshold. The pail was filled with sand and he now proceeded to sprinkle its contents over the floor, which was smeary with blood. When he had emptied the pail he wiped his hands on his long apron and turned back to them. "A filthy job. I've got to carry those fellows all by myself. It's not half as bad as long as they haven't croaked, but once they're stiff they weigh even more. I'm telling you, it's a damned . . ."

Ranek and Deborah no longer listened to him. They were standing in front of one of the piles. They searched and searched, but they couldn't find Fred.

* * *

Then the attendant came to help and pulled Fred from among the corpses. He was unconscious. Ranek didn't recognize him even though he knew that the skeleton lying before him on the

floor was his brother. He knew it because the attendant, after having turned Fred around a few times, said to them, "That's him!" And he knew it because Deborah had begun to sob and knelt down beside the skeleton.

Ranek stood behind Deborah and stared spellbound into the unfamiliar face she held in her hands and was caressing. He felt no pain, only a great astonishment that had taken hold of him completely, and he asked himself whether that disfigured, shrivelled-up face in her hands was really the same face people had always said resembled his?

Now she straightened up. She said to him, "Come. Take hold of him! We have to get away from here!"

"I'll carry the heavy end," he said. "You take the legs, that'll be easier for you."

They lifted the unconscious Fred up with one jerk and staggered out into the open. When they had reached the middle of the yard, Ranek was at the end of his strength. He felt as if his arms were being dragged down by ropes, his knees began to cave in and sparks seemed to fly before his eyes.

"Set him down!" he groaned.

"Yes . . . but watch out!"

They laid him carefully on the ground.

"I didn't grab him the right way," he said.

"Turn around," she said, "grab him under the shoulders. Then we can walk sideways."

"All right, but let me just catch my breath."

Fred had become conscious in the meantime. He opened his eyes and blinked with fright. He saw a long wall that rose like an apparition out of the moonlit night, he saw the wide-open sky above him glistening with stars, and then he noticed the two dark shapes bending over him. He wanted to scream, but his fear clamped his mouth shut. Now he heard heavy, shuffling steps approaching. A man's deep voice saying in Ukrainian, "you can't leave him lying here. You've got to take him away before the police come."

A woman's voice answered, "Yes . . . we're about to go." He wanted to lift his head because he suddenly felt he recognized

the voice, but his head felt so heavy and the more he strained the heavier it felt. He could feel himself being lifted up . . . and lost consciousness again.

* * *

They stopped at some distance from the hospital and laid their burden behind a rubble pile by the edge of the street.

"We'll wait here until morning," Ranek said.

It was not long until the end of the night. Soon the sky began to turn pale and the stars vanished one after the other as if an invisible hand were plucking them. They were lucky and met a man with a cart who took Fred with him for a way without asking for payment.

They did not reach the sanctuary until the middle of the morning.

* * *

Of course there was no chance of getting Fred a place in the room. He was sick and therefore could not lie with the others. There was nothing they could do about that.

Ranek stowed his brother expertly in the hole under the stairway . . . exactly as he had done with Levy. He found a few fence boards and covered Fred with them. It was just a rehearsal . . . he simply wanted to see whether it would be possible to hide Fred in case of a raid.

Fred was no bigger than Levy, his legs weren't longer either, and even his skull was about as wide as his predecessor's.

Deborah did not try to stop Ranek. She said to herself. He knows what he's doing. Even though it hurt her to have to watch all the things that Ranek did with the invalid, how he shoved him back and forth as if he weren't a human being but some object . . . how he stuffed him into the dark hole, with the head against the damp, crumbling wall, how he heaped wood on top

of him to take it away again immediately . . . how Ranek pulled him and shoved him with his feet.

After Ranek had convinced himself that the hollow—or “the hole”—as it was known familiarly—was “made” for Fred, he dragged the fence boards back to the fence and leaned them provisionally into the gaps where they belonged.

“It’s actually only a hiding place for the night,” he said to Deborah. “Nevertheless I have decided that he should lie there in daytime, too.”

“Why, Ranek?”

“So that people won’t step all over him.”

Some people had gathered in front of the stairs. Their faces were uncommunicative yet malicious at the same time. Ranek talked with them and convinced them finally that the two new ones had no intention of displacing anyone in the room, and made it clear to them that not only his brother but Deborah too would stay in the hallway, to care for the invalid.

“And what if your brother croaks?” one of the people asked. “Then there isn’t going to be any need for her to care for him and then your sister-in-law is going to want to come up into the room.”

“Of course. But she’s going to wait her turn,” Ranek said. “She won’t come upstairs before a place has become free.”

When Sigi stepped into the hallway and came up to the stairs he gave Fred a long, thoughtful look. Sigi knew what was going on. He turned to Deborah and the only thing he said to her was: “Your husband is going to get wet when I piss into the hallway at night. That isn’t going to be any fun for him.”

A little later Red joined the gathering and spat in Fred’s face. He was the only one who dared. Deborah said nothing. She wiped the gob off Fred’s face, that was all.

The people did not stay long. Their curiosity was like sulphur at the tip of a match—it burned out as quickly as it burst into flame. Most of them had only compared the joints of Fred’s arms and legs critically with Deborah’s . . . and then they had left again.

That same day Ranek exchanged his bottle of schnapps. A Ukrainian peasant gave him corn flour for it: a little sackful that weighed about one *pud*, which, converted, made about thirty-five pounds. Deborah had ripped open the seam of Fred's trousers, taken out the money, and entrusted it to Ranek; he had used it to purchase a couple of eggs, two bottles of milk, and an empty sack, which was thrown in gratis, on the black market. The sack was for Fred. She had simply decided to prepare Fred a soft place to sleep and he had not wanted to refuse her wish.

Before going to town he had squatted down by his brother's side once more. He had regarded him quizzically and had reached the conclusion that it would be better for him if he did not have to suffer much longer. Fred would die under the stairway, as Levy had. One shouldn't take it too badly. A painful but inevitable event was preferable if it occurred sooner than later; one just had to get used to the idea and come to terms with it.

Now—on his way home from the Bazaar—he was thinking of his brother again. He knew that one of Fred's teeth was made of gold. When his time has come, he thought, you'll pull his tooth and buy new corn flour with it. He could see several worry-free weeks lying ahead of him . . . and after that he'd just have to see how he would manage.

When he reached the vicinity of the sanctuary, he stopped for a few minutes to drink one of the bottles of milk. He flung the

empty bottle away, and he thought somewhat shamefacedly, She doesn't have to know about that.

At home he said to her, "Here's a *pud* of flour. That's what I got for the schnapps."

Her face glowed with happiness. "That's well done, Ranek."

She unwrapped the second sack, which was meant for Fred and into which he had stuffed the other provisions.

"Is that . . . from Fred's money?"

"Yes."

"I thought that we would be able to get more with it," she said, slightly disappointed, "especially more milk."

"Milk is damned expensive," he said evasively.

"Yes, I know. Don't be angry. I just thought that . . . because we need more milk for Fred."

"He'll just have to do with one bottle."

"He has to regain his strength, Ranek."

"He'll make it."

"We won't touch the milk, all right?"

"All right . . . the milk's just for him."

"That's nice of you," she said thankfully.

He nodded briefly, flung the sack with the corn flour over his shoulder, and stomped upstairs. There he tied the sack to the banister.

She had followed him. "Out here?" she asked.

"Yes, the sack stays here. You're living in the hallway and can watch it. And never let the sack out of your sight when you cook. Always keep the door open."

He left her standing there and walked out into the yard. When she followed him there after a time, she saw him standing between the junk piles. He was holding a couple of large tin cans in his hands. "Here are some kitchen utensils," he said. "They'll do for the meantime. Later on we'll get more."

"Fine," she said.

"Did you give Fred the sack to lie on?"

She nodded.

"That's better than the hard earth, isn't it?"

"That is better."

He showed her the rusty hammer. "I found this a few weeks ago, also here on the junk pile . . . before they nabbed me. You can use that for chopping wood."

"The hammer?"

"Yes, because we have no hatchet. It'll do for smashing thin boards."

She took the hammer. She saw that he was grinning. "With the sharp end," he said.

"I know."

"I'll bring you a couple of boards," he said. "You can hack them up. Leave the hammer in the yard once you're done." He pointed to the spot in the junk pile where he'd found it. "Put it back there. Then we'll always know where to find it. We'll only lose it in the room."

She got to work at once. She scraped the rust out of the tin cans and she rinsed them, then she split the wood, and when she was done with everything she went upstairs, made a fire in the stove, and put on water for their corn-meal mush.

* * *

Ranek stayed near the stove while she cooked. At first he had feared they would chase her out of the room; but he calmed down again because nothing of the sort occurred. So the people had no objections to her using the stove; that was a step forward, no doubt. Did they trust her? Did the people really believe that she did not intend to displace any of them? Or had they already forgotten who she was?

He noticed that many eyes were looking in the direction of the stove . . . but that didn't mean anything . . . it was always like that. They weren't looking at her, they were staring at the pot. Sigi too seemed fascinated. He sat at the platform edge, dangling his legs in an uneven rhythm.

Now she poured flour for the second time into the boiling water. She stirred busily with a splinter of wood. Her movements were not at all like Sarah's, he thought . . . much softer, much more loving; she reminded him so much of his mother. When the

corn mush was ready she emptied it on a board and cut the compact mass into five parts with a thread. Mother too had always done it like that.

"There are only three of us," he said with a smile. "Why did you make five portions?"

"I don't know," she said softly.

"Well, it doesn't matter."

"We'll eat the two other portions later on."

"One of them belongs to Red."

"Who's that?"

"The guy who spat in Fred's face before."

"Why do you want . . . ?"

"Because I'm sleeping with him tonight. I pay him for that."

"Then give it to him now," she said, "otherwise we might have nothing left over."

He nodded. He scraped a portion down from the board and tossed it under the stove and watched Red pick it out of the dirt and devour it.

They ate their meal outside on the stairs.

"You told me that there's a doctor living here."

"Dr Hofer," he said with a full mouth. "He's in town now. He'll take a look at Fred when he gets back."

"Do we have to pay for that?"

"He wouldn't take any money from me."

"Do you think he can help?"

"No," he said harshly.

"You can't see any spots on his body yet," she said hesitantly. "It's not definite that he has typhus."

"Don't fool yourself. He has typhus. I've lived here too long and seen too many of these cases. The spots will become visible before long; you can depend on it."

"What are we going to do, Ranek?"

"You have to let things run their course," he said, and he could not help thinking of Levy's anxious words when he had talked to him that night in the hallway . . . Perhaps I'll survive the crisis?

"Perhaps he'll survive the crisis," he now said to her.

"With God's help," she said fervently.

* * *

After Deborah had gone downstairs to feed Fred, Ranek went back in the room and squatted down next to Sigi on the platform.

"How did you ever manage to tear yourself away from her!" Sigi grinned.

"She's downstairs now. She's feeding my brother."

"It's a pity for every bite; your brother'll croak anyway."

"I know that."

"But you let her do as she pleases?"

"She wants to care for him. She believes that he'll pull through with her help. That's her business."

Sigi's grin widened. "By the way, what's her name?"

"Deborah."

"She looks a little funny."

Ranek nodded. Slowly he said, "She has the face of a saint."

Sigi snapped his thin fingers and his pale eyes twinkled with amusement. "You gave her such a strange look back there at the stove. Just waiting for your brother to croak before hopping into bed with her, eh?"

"Son of a bitch," said Ranek, "you god-damned son of a bitch."

"Funny expression, what? Hopping into bed? When most of us have practically forgotten what a bed is . . . what a real bed looks like?"

"Don't talk so much."

"I don't hold it against you wanting to go to bed with her," Sigi started again. "I did the same thing when my brother dropped dead." Sigi edged closer to him now. His chalk-white face became livelier, the eyes protruded a little; he licked his lips and breathed heavily. "It happened a few months ago," he said haltingly. "He had a pretty wife. Also had dark hair. Tall and dark, imagine . . . a head taller than I. Fed her for a while, you understand, and for that I got everything I wanted. Ate out of my hand, I'm telling you, ate right out of my hand."

"Listening to you makes me want to puke," said Ranek, and got up, but Sigi, who suddenly realized that he had made a mistake, refused to let him go. "One talks a lot of nonsense, at times," he said. "Happens because we've nothing to do. You understand what I mean, eh?" Sigi quickly rolled two cigarettes. "Here, take one."

Ranek took the cigarette.

"I didn't mean what I just said," Sigi whispered, "about me and my sister-in-law."

"Of course," Ranek said, nodding, "I knew that all the time," even though he thought to himself, He's lying.

"She was nabbed later on," said Sigi, "nothing I could do about it." Sigi gave him a light. "Taste all right?"

"Yes, tastes all right."

"It's a mixture," said Sigi.

Ranek twisted his mouth trying to smile. "I'll tell you now why I gave her such a strange look before . . . When she was standing in front of the stove and stirring the corn mush she suddenly reminded me of someone."

"Reminded you of whom?"

"Of my mother."

Sigi placed a hand on his shoulder. "The old woman told me what they did to your parents," he said, and his voice had become serious.

7

Hofer did not examine Fred until next morning, when it had become light in the hallway. His diagnosis was typhus. He did not bother long with him, said a few unimportant words to Deborah, and disappeared.

The same afternoon Ranek met him accidentally at the corner of the Pushkinskaja. He noticed that Hofer was carrying a doctor's case again.

"Where'd you get the case?"

"Dr Goldberg lent it to me."

"You'll inherit it, won't you?"

"Probably," Hofer said curtly.

"Do you want to walk a way with me?"

"Where to?"

"I'm not going anywhere in particular. Just want to exercise my legs a little. You're not going anywhere either, are you?"

Hofer shook his head.

They slowly crossed the street. Hofer told him about his house calls . . . the same old story. Ranek knew it by heart: how the doctor's hands were tied because they had no drugs and because you couldn't even get them on the black market. "Those damned bastards," said Hofer, "what they've done." He did not ask how Fred was. Perhaps he avoided the subject on purpose, since he knew that nothing more could be done for Fred.

They reached the brothel. The hunchbacked beggar woman sat at the entrance. She kept staring at Ranek.

"What's the woman want from you?" Hofer said softly.

"She knows me. She used to beg in front of the coffeehouse."

Hofer gave her a quick glance, then he looked intently at the brothel door. "There's a doorman here usually, isn't there?"

"Yes."

"Usually you also hear noise coming from upstairs."

"Yes."

"How odd," said Hofer, "how very odd. Do you think the brothel is closed?"

"Of course not. It's probably the one day a month that there's no action."

They ambled back when they passed the beggar woman, Hofer gave her an alms. "Thank you," said the woman. However, she did not look at Hofer while saying it, but at Ranek, and it seemed to him as if the thank you was meant for him.

"I'll give you something another time," said Ranek.

"Yes, I know," she said, and her melancholy eyes were still riveted on him.

Ranek inspected her critically. A spider, he thought, and sud-

denly he remembered something : another spider, only much smaller . . . a little brown skeleton that the hunchback used to drag around with her.

"Where's the kid?" he asked evenly.

The woman grinned with stiffened lips.

"Is it dead?"

The woman nodded.

Ranek suddenly proceeded to laugh. He noticed Hofer tugging at his sleeve, but he did not stop laughing. He saw how Hofer bent down to the woman in embarrassment and whispered something into her ear : "He doesn't mean it badly, he's just laughing because he believes . . . that it's better for the child if it's dead."

Later, as they were walking to the coffeehouse, Hofer asked, "Why did you laugh?"

"I have no idea," said Ranek.

He looked for Betty in the coffeehouse, but she wasn't there.

He asked Itzig Lupu. Lupu was surprised : "Where have you been? On the moon? Don't you know the brothel's been closed?"

"I was away for a few weeks. I didn't know it."

"A few soldiers got the syph," said Lupu, "so they had to close up shop."

"Where are the girls?"

"Deported. To the Bug. All of them. That's what they deserve."

* * *

What Lupu said was like a knockout punch. He had not been prepared for that.

At home Sigi calmed him down. "I understand," said Sigi. "She was a meal ticket. But you can't count on something like that nowadays."

"Yes," Ranek said, "you can't count on something like that."

"Did you tell Deborah?"

"No," said Ranek. "No need for Deborah to know."

"Forget about Betty. Don't think about her. Or you'll just get an appetite."

"Appetite for what?"

"Appetite for soup," said Sigi, "or meat."

Ranek nodded. "Or cake," he said. "You could get good cake in the brothel."

"That's true," said Sigi, "damn it."

* * *

They had corn meal and eggs for supper. Afterward he and Deborah walked up and down the yard, talking. It was a fine evening; they had filled their stomachs and were almost happy. When it started to get dark he began to feel terribly tired; he crawled into his lair under the stove and fell to sleep at once.

Late at night a shrill screech awoke him. He shot up, crawled with a buzzing head out from under the stove. The screech had ceased. But now he heard whimpering in the hallway . . . then two voices quarrelling. He recognized Sigi and Deborah.

He scrambled up, jerked the door open and collided with Sigi.

"What's the matter, damn it?"

"Someone sneaked in here," said Sigi, "a woman . . . who's homeless."

He felt someone clutching his arm in the dark. "Sigi threw her down the stairs," said Deborah.

"So . . . is that what he did?" he said indifferently.

"Sneaked in here," Sigi said again.

"You're mean!" Deborah cursed.

"Why don't you stop quarrelling!"

"Why did he have to do that?"

"Yes, why, of all things?" Sigi mocked her. "Why, of all things?"

Sigi walked back into the room and slammed the door behind him.

"What is that fellow doing in the hallway at this time of night? Did he make a pass at you or something?"

"No . . . not that."

Ranek grinned. "Oh, I see," he said, "oh well."

"Yes," she said.

"Pissed into the hall again?"

"Yes," she said.

"That fellow always had to in the middle of the night," said Ranek.

"He already explained that to me."

"A pisshead," said Ranek, "a god-damned pisshead."

She didn't say anything at all. She now walked carefully down the dark steps and Ranek followed her. Then he heard her voice near the covert underneath the stairs, and he had the feeling she was speaking to Fred, but he knew that she was not talking to Fred; she was speaking to the homeless woman who had fallen there.

"He is gone," she said softly, "he is gone." And then, "You don't have to be afraid."

"My back," the voice whimpered, "my back, oh my back . . . don't touch me, let me be."

Deborah whispered to him, "Let's hope she's not badly injured."

"It won't be all that bad," he said.

"It will be better if we take her away from here."

"What do you plan to do with her?"

"We can carry her a bit farther . . . as far as the other wall."

"Why?"

"I don't want her to lie next to Fred."

"Fine with me."

"Come help me!"

He bent down, but when he was about to touch the woman she said, "You don't have to carry me. Just help me a little. I think I can walk."

They helped her to get up, supported her, and walked her across to the hallway wall. There she lay down again while he and Deborah walked back to the stairs.

"She's quite a young girl yet," said Deborah, "almost a child."

"Did you see her in the light?"

"No, but you notice that she is still very young."

"Well, that's all the same."

"Before Sigi came I talked a few words with her. She told me

that she came out of the bushes; she had been terribly afraid; she couldn't stand it any more at night outside."

"What about her family?"

"She has a mother. The mother is still in the bushes."

Ranek nodded. Then he said, "She can't stay here. Imagine what would happen if we gave shelter to everyone who came out of the bushes? What would become of us then?" It suddenly occurred to him that not very long ago when he had been homeless he had been told the same thing. But he did not feel like taking back his words. He merely expressed what he felt at the moment. When she did not reply, he continued, "We have to be hard. We have to refuse to let them in. Because we have to think of ourselves first. And we can't allow ourselves to be weak and feel guilty about it."

"Let her stay here tonight. For my sake. What does it matter? Just for one night."

"I said the same thing at one time," he laughed softly, "let me stay here just for one night. But no one believed me."

"Please, Ranek. Let her stay. Where can she go now... in the middle of the night?"

He stopped contradicting her. Why quarrel? he thought. Why explain to her that helping someone wasn't worth the trouble! After all, the experiences were the same, and if she still hasn't learned, then it was too late for her to learn now.

Ranek did not go back to the room at once; first he wanted to go to the lavatory. Nothing's going on outside, he thought, no roundups today; all you have to do is watch out for the night patrol. He left the hallway and darted across the yard.

* * *

The latrine was so primitive it did not even have a bar you could hold onto. It had no roof or walls, consisted solely of a long board that stretched from one side of the deep pit to the other, a board covered with excrement and urine. At one time men and women had not gone to the latrine together. But such considerations had been scuttled because most people were suffer-

ing from diarrhoea and could not wait. Ranek had squatted there innumerable times with a woman next to him and had never given it any thought.

Now he wanted to stay there for a long period. One did not always have a chance to do this. When it rained you got soaked to the skin and in winter your behind froze. At other times when the weather did not provide an obstacle there was such a rush to the board that you were glad to leave as quickly as you could.

After about half an hour he left and went back into the house. He felt faint but well, like an animal that had gorged itself and then emptied its bowels. As he reached the spot in the hallway where the homeless woman was spending the night, he came to a stop. She's fallen asleep, he thought. He stared at the spot in the darkness where he suspected that the girl's body was, not a thought in his mind . . . when it began to seem to him as though not a stranger but Sarah was lying there on the floor waiting for him. Without quite knowing what he was doing he cowered down beside her.

He listened for noises in the hallway: the soft breathing of the woman by the wall . . . and the other woman, upstairs on the landing . . . and then the feverish muttering of the man under the stairs.

"You had something to eat tonight"—Sarah's mask smiled at him—and in his imagination he heard her whisper, "Come to me! You had something to eat! Try it!" And then the voice became more insistent: "You have to prove that you're not finished yet. It's all a lie what they say about you. You're still man enough."

His hand groped over the woman's dress. Suddenly he knew it wasn't Sarah but now that he was so close to the unfamiliar body his blood began to race and he did not want to retreat. He had only one thought in his mind: I'm still a man. He felt fasteners and tore them open with uncertain, hasty movements. The girl was nude under the dress. That's what he had thought—she had sold everything she didn't need. She was just another of the poorest among the poor, a refuse eater like himself, someone

who didn't own anything but the rags on her body. He spat angrily into his hands and tore her scrawny thighs apart.

She awoke. At first he thought she would screech, but evidently she was afraid of waking the people, being discovered again, and getting a second beating. Silently she struggled against him. She pushed with both feet against the ground and tried to inch away from him while her weak hands flailed at his face.

"You'll get something to eat," he whispered. "I know you're hungry... I've got some corn... enough for you... You're hungry, aren't you?"

She struggled a while longer, silently and without strength. Then she suddenly capitulated. Poor, famished thing, he thought.

* * *

Deborah slept next to the flour sack. When Ranek came upstairs and opened the sack she woke up.

"What's the matter, Ranek?"

He made no reply, took some flour out of the sack, wrapped it into a piece of newspaper, and shuffled back downstairs.

She heard him whispering with the girl. She immediately knew what had happened.

When he came back up he said, "For some cigarettes."

Why is he lying to me? she thought, but she said nothing to him.

Then he went into the room without saying another word.

8

The room was the same every morning : full of noise and a foul smell. Some people were sitting down and delousing each other, others were eating unobtrusively, some were so exhausted

they were still asleep and even the loudest noises didn't wake them. The early risers staggered out to the latrine and returned without having washed. The door opened and shut without let-up. Ranek followed Sigi. Sigi urinated outside on the landing even at this hour. Ranek was right behind him. "Why don't you go the latrine like others?"

Sigi made no reply.

"It's different at night," Ranek said, "but in daytime you could go outside." And he repeated, "Like the others."

"Let me be," Sigi moaned. "I feel rotten today. Had a dizzy spell a while ago. Can't walk downstairs."

"Sure you can. Don't try to talk your way out of it. You're lazy. That's all."

Sigi slowly turned his head. "You must give me something to eat," he said. But he pronounced the "must" softly, timorously, and his eyes protruded a little out of their deep sockets as with someone who has been strangled. "Do you think there's something the matter with me?"

Sigi kept fiddling around at his crotch, stroking his shaved pate anxiously with the other hand. "If you only knew what a headache I have . . ."

Now he turned completely around to him. "I still have two cigarettes . . . you can have them if you give me a little corn . . . they're genuine."

Ranek was in a good mood. "I already know someone who'll get your place when you croak," he said.

"You," Sigi said.

Ranek shook his head and laughed. "I have someone else in mind."

"Your sister-in-law?"

"No, she'll stay with my brother."

"The woman who came last night?"

"Right," Ranek laughed, "she'll get it."

"I should have broken her neck," Sigi growled. Now he handed Ranek the cigarettes. "Will you give me something later on?"

"Yes."

"Thanks, you are—"

"Get out of here," Ranek said.

Sigi turned around and disappeared inside the room. Ranek walked downstairs. He was surprised to find his brother lying in the middle of the hallway as if trying to block people's way. Fred had probably crawled out of his hole during the night in his delirium and had collapsed there.

Ranek turned him over with his foot. His brother, who had been lying on his stomach, came to lie on his back. Fred was conscious. The eyes in the shrivelled, bearded face stared helplessly at him. "Ranek," he whispered, "Ranek."

* * *

Deborah, who was leaning with her back against the banister and who was still half asleep, heard everything that happened in her vicinity but did not have the strength to get up. She heard people stumbling downstairs, she also heard Sigi step to the banister and urinate close to her, and she heard Ranek's voice, then Sigi, then Ranek again, but she could not raise her eyelids. Somewhat later, when someone called her name, she staggered drowsily to her feet.

Ranek called again : "Deborah."

As she walked downstairs Ranek was rolling Fred back on his stomach with his foot.

"What are you doing?" she exclaimed, startled.

"What do you think I'm doing?" he replied grumpily. Then he enlightened her.

Once Fred had been put away again in the cupboard, he said to her, "They trampled all over him. You have to watch that he doesn't crawl back out of his hole. You know how people are when someone like that is lying in their way. I told you before, I warned you."

* * *

Later on, at the stove, she said, "Ranek !"

"Yes, Deborah."

"Did you see his face?"

He didn't know what she meant.

"The beard," she said, "he looks so old."

"What does it matter what he looks like."

"It does matter. Particularly now it matters." She persisted :
"I'd like to shave him, but Fred lost his razor. Will you lend me yours?"

"I don't have one either."

"But don't you shave sometimes?"

"Do I look as if I just shaved?" he joked.

"No, but your beard isn't that long."

"I borrow a razor now and then." He interjected a pause as though he were remembering something, then he said, "The last time I shaved was at the railway bridge. Used a borrowed razor then, too."

"Get me one," she begged.

"He nodded. "Fine...after we've eaten...if you want."
They dropped the topic while she stirred the corn mush. Why did she want to shave him? Everything would be over in a few days anyway... He tried to picture Fred's face when his time had come : a cold, petrified face... and a dead, silent mouth. No one will complain when you pull his gold tooth, thought Ranek. It'll be a painless operation because death is the perfect anaesthetic... Ranek touched her shoulders lightly. "Deborah," he said softly, "do you still remember how much Fred paid for his gold tooth?"

She shook her head... and then she moved the pot away from the flame and looked at him in silence. Though he had not said another word, she could read his every thought from his hard, unyielding eyes.

* * *

Two women stepped out of the bushes. They walked hesitantly around the house, then diagonally across the yard and squatted down in front of the fence.

Ranek followed them. Though he was not absolutely sure, he felt that he knew who they were : the younger of the two could only be the one who had slept in the hallway last night; the

older one must be her mother, whom the girl had mentioned she would bring along.

Ranek played around with the broken fence boards, trying to overhear their conversation, but he could not make out anything through the babble coming from the latrine. Only when he stepped closer did he understand a few sentences.

"I don't see her around," the younger one said. "Perhaps she isn't here any more."

"Why shouldn't she be here any more?" the old woman said, shaking her head.

"She was still here this morning. She was sitting on top of the stairway. She was asleep. I didn't want to wake her."

"You should have awakened her."

"Should I go inside?"

"Do as you please."

"No, better not. She's bound to come out sometime today."

Ranek knew they were talking about Deborah.

The two women noticed him now. The old woman lifted her head and looked at him indifferently, her eyes remaining half closed as though she was too weary to open them completely. The young woman inspected him with curiosity; she had not recognized him.

He saw her for the first time in daylight: he saw an ugly, yellowish, scar-covered face wreathed by dense brown hair. Her grey eyes were infected and gave a tearful impression, though most likely this was due to lack of sleep. He further noticed a dirty bow in her hair, and then he looked back at the old woman.

"You two don't belong here, do you?" he asked.

"No, but we know someone who will put in a good word for us."

"Really . . . who is that?"

"A woman. I don't know her name."

"I was here yesterday," the young one said now. "I met the woman in the hallway."

"Do you mean the one who lives in the hallway?"

"Yes. She lives in the hallway. But she belongs here anyway. And she can help us."

"Well, then everything is all right," Ranek said, grinning. He

took another close look into her face. No, she hasn't recognized you, he thought.

"I almost didn't come back here," the young one said softly, "but we can no longer stand it behind the bushes . . . and then . . . Mother is an old woman."

He grinned sympathetically. Then he nodded to them and shuffled off.

"That fellow made such a funny face," the old woman said now, "as if he had a bad conscience. You think it was him who tried to rape you last night?"

"I told you it was too dark to recognize anyone."

"Think back—what about his voice?"

"I don't know . . . he talked very softly to me."

"So you don't think . . . ?"

"No, I don't think it was him."

"Raped!" The old woman croaked while her half-closed eyelids suddenly lifted; she threw a brief, penetrating glance at her daughter and shook her head once more.

"He only wanted to," the young one said laconically, "but he couldn't do it, he was impotent."

"Then he should have just left you alone," the old woman said, somewhat relieved.

The young one only nodded.

"Such an impotent pig," the old one said.

"Yes, an impotent pig," the young one agreed.

The old woman began to look thoughtful; suddenly she said, "It's still rape. Even if he didn't do anything."

"Of course," the young one said.

"Did he give you something for it at least?"

"Yes, a little corn. I didn't want to tell you about it before. Otherwise you'd start thinking I wasn't raped at all."

"I see! That's all I wanted to know!" The old woman couldn't sit still. "Whore!" she hissed. "So he didn't rape you at all!"

The young woman took a knotted-up newspaper out of her pocket. "He wrapped it up in that," she said.

"You've nibbled at it already, I bet."

"Yes, a little."

"Come, give it to me," the old woman said greedily.

"You'll stuff yourself with it," the young one said, perking up, "but you call me a whore."

"Come, give it to me," the old woman repeated.

9

At night Deborah awakened him. Her voice sounded frightened and helpless. "The flour sack is gone, Ranek . . . I don't know how . . ."

Confused, he followed her out into the dark hallway. He groped up and down the banister a few times, but there was no trace of the sack.

"I don't understand. I tied it to the banister?"

"Gone," she said despairingly, "completely gone."

Red joined them now. "So, you've been robbed?" he said gleefully.

"I was sleeping with my head on the bag," Deborah said uncomprehendingly. "It simply doesn't make any sense how someone can pull the sack from under my head without my noticing it."

"Yes, you can depend on those fellows." Red grinned. "They know their business."

She turned to Ranek. "Should we look in the room?"

"Yes, we can do that. Won't be much use, though. Even if it was one of our people, they wouldn't be so stupid and take the sack into the room. There are other hiding places."

"It wasn't anyone from the room," Red said.

"How do you know that?"

"I wasn't asleep. I would have heard something. But the door wasn't opened once."

"Shit," Ranek said.

"It must have been someone from the bushes," Red said. "You know perfectly well how little noise that scum makes when it sneaks about at night."

Ranek paid no attention to him. He took Deborah into the room. He lighted the lamp and shone it over the platform . . . and then the floor . . . and then the platform once more. When they could not find anything, they went back onto the landing. They walked downstairs and searched the hallway, but there they found only the invalid in his covert and the two women who were sleeping next to the wall.

"Come into the yard!" he said to her.

He extinguished the lamp. They searched the yard. Then they walked to the back of the house and through a patch of brush, but it was hopeless.

On the way back they heard screams coming from the stairwell. Deborah suddenly started to run. Breathless, she returned to the hallway and saw a shadow squatting on the ground. It seemed to catapult into the air as she stepped in, ran against the stairs, cowered down, panting.

She had forgotten about the flour. Staggering through the dark hallway, she stumbled over the bodies of the two women and held on to one of them as she fell . . . and felt something sticky on her hands. Blood, it struck her, blood . . .

She got back up and walked carefully towards the stairs. Now the shadow moved. "Did you trip?" a malicious voice asked out of the dark. She recognized that it was Red. "No," she said angrily, "but I touched something and now my hands are covered with blood."

Red laughed. "I gave the two of them a good beating. A warning for the future. It'll do them good. Now they'll know what will happen to them if they should get the idea that they can live here permanently."

"Sigi threw one of them downstairs yesterday," Deborah said harshly, "and later someone came and raped her, and now you! They're women. They can't defend themselves."

"Ach, women!" Red's voice became shrill. "Scum . . . scum of

the streets, scum that doesn't belong anywhere."

Deborah turned away from him and went upstairs. She heard Ranek enter the hallway. Now she remembered the stolen sack again and the thought hit her with all its weight. Trembling, she sat down on the steps and waited for Ranek to come back to her.

* * *

It was shortly before daybreak and it was still quiet and dark in the yard. Today Ranek was the first one at the latrine. The loneliness out here had a soothing effect on him. Though he still thought of the stolen flour, the fear of starving, which had kept him awake all night, no longer tortured him. The sky behind the railway yards gradually came alive. It also became somewhat lighter in the yard. He felt that he was on top of a mountain gazing down on a wide, twilight landscape filled with craters, and felt immensely relieved.

After a while he saw a woman step out of the house. She was coming directly towards the latrine. Now he recognized her : the old Levy woman.

When the old woman shuffled over to the board and then squatted down next to him, he said to her with a smile, "You are the last person I would have expected."

"Why?"

"If I'm not mistaken you usually don't leave the house before dawn."

"But it is so quiet here now," she said, "I don't think there'll be any more razzias in our area."

She pulled up her dress and twisted it around her bony shoulders. He noted that she had hardly any behind left at all, at least it looked like that; just an elongation of her bony thigh, that was all. He thought, She's dying too, slowly.

Now she turned back to him. Her long, slack breasts dangled over her stomach; he noticed the dark brown nipples that looked like ugly birthmarks, before he turned his head in disgust.

"Did you find your flour sack?" she asked.

"Red told you about it, didn't he?"

"Yes."

"Do you know anything?"

"No. I can't give you a tip. I don't know anything."

He spat into the sinkhole and then pulled up his trousers.

"I've rotten luck," he said.

"You'll buy yourself some more flour."

"Without any money. How do you think I'll work that?"

"You're like a cat. You have nine lives."

"Is that what you think of me?"

"Yes. I once said the same thing to Sigi : 'Ranek, that fellow' " —she laughed softly—" 'you can't get him down.' You'll find a way somehow."

"Thanks. You are encouraging. I can almost believe in myself again."

"And then," the old woman whispered, "you still have the gold tooth . . . Fred's gold tooth; that's still valuable and one fine day you'll pull that tooth, won't you?"

"Fred doesn't have a gold tooth," said Ranek.

"But he does," the old woman said, giggling. "He has one. Somebody saw it."

"Who saw it?"

"Red," said the old woman. "Red saw it." She cowered down close to the filthy boards to let him by, and he climbed over her. So she knows that too, he thought. How fast everything gets round here.

When he stepped back through the entrance to the ruin, he heard his brother groaning in his hole under the stairs; however, he paid him no attention. He looked around for the two women. They were nowhere to be seen. Suddenly he knew that the two had gone back into the bushes and would not return. Evidently the sanctuary was more terrifying than the bushes.

Ranek had been busy at the Bazaar all day long; afterward he stopped briefly at the coffeehouse.

Now he stood at the counter. A few steps away a Rumanian soldier was lounging, a young man with an angular peasant's skull that looked as if it was cast out of bronze; the soldier was drinking coffee and was chatting with Itzig Lupu.

Ranek had a few leftovers in his jacket pockets; it was not as much as he had hoped for but enough to cook a soup for the three of them: a few rotten potatoes and beets, most of the foul spots he had cut away with his knife. But his real stroke had been when he had found a bag full of apples in the late afternoon, a bag full of apples which he had filched from a black marketeer while the soldiers were putting on one of their harmless shooting exhibitions. It had been a fine opportunity.

Ranek ate an apple now. When he had finished it, he took a second one out of the bag and ate it as well. The apples had the tart taste of orange peel... so it seemed to him at least.

Itzig did not pay any attention to him, he was so wrapped up in his talk with the soldier; but the soldier wasn't paying any attention to Ranek either. He did not seem to have noticed Ranek eyeing the cup of coffee which he held carelessly in his large peasant hands, every so often placing it absent-mindedly to his lips.

At this moment the soldier said to Itzig Lupu, "You seem to think that I belong to the ghetto occupation?"

"No, I don't think that," said Itzig. "It's obvious that you're coming from the front."

"Yes, directly from the front," said the soldier, nodding.

"You're on your way home, aren't you?" Itzig asked ingratiatingly.

"You're right . . . home," the soldier said, "my first leave . . . wasn't easy to get that leave." He lifted the cup as though he wanted to clink with an invisible glass. "Long live home!"

Itzig grinned politely.

"A pity you don't have schnapps," the soldier said.

"Every so often I get a bottle but at the moment . . . well, you can see for yourself?"

The soldier took a deliberate sip, then he looked silently and lost in thought in front of him. After a while Lupu resumed the conversation. "Have you been with us in Prokov before?"

The soldier looked up. "Yes, once," he said pensively, "that was on the way to the front . . . a couple of months ago . . . stopped for a few hours here." He suddenly became lively. "Didn't think that I'd still meet so many of you on my second visit to this dump."

"We're in good shape here," said Itzig Lupu. "Thank God the authorities are behaving correctly. We aren't living under the Germans, luckily."

"Yes, that's true," the soldier said sympathetically, "you're not that bad off with us."

He winked at Itzig. "I heard a rumour recently that all the Jews here croaked . . . proves again that you can't trust rumours."

Itzig busily wiped the spilled coffee from under the soldier's cup.

"What's funny," the soldier said shaking his head, "is that if you come back here after a few months you have the feeling that there are even more of you around."

"Would you like some more coffee?"

"Yes, give me another."

Itzig refilled his cup. The soldier sipped for a while, then he bent over the counter and whispered into Itzig's ear.

Itzig nodded importantly and then said politely, "The brothel was closed for a few weeks but now it's open again; the house is nearby, you'll find it easily."

The soldier paid and made to leave. Itzig came out from be-

hind the counter, looking stiff and respectful, and accompanied the soldier to the door.

Well, finally, thought Ranek, reached for the half-empty cup, and slurped it empty. When Itzig came back, Ranek unobtrusively wiped the coffee grounds from his mouth. "What are you doing here still?" Itzig said curtly. "You seem to think I didn't notice you before?"

"Nothing," grinned Ranek. "I was just waiting for someone . . . and the person didn't come, unfortunately."

"We'll be closing shortly," Itzig said nervously. "If you want to drink or something you'd better order now."

"No, thanks . . . not today," said Ranek.

"No one here who's willing to buy you something, eh?"

Ranek grinned again.

"Then get the hell out of here!" Itzig said.

A curse hung on Ranek's lips, but he controlled himself and walked out without saying another word.

* * *

Ranek disappeared among the crowds on the Pushkinskaja. He had not eaten much but still he felt stronger than he had in the morning, when he had come to town on an empty stomach.

He stopped in front of the brothel. Two girls at the entrance, who had looked shyly round and then gone quickly inside, caught his attention. So they've really opened up shop again, he thought. Because his curiosity had been roused he stepped up to the hunchback who had taken up her old position at the front door. She had her tin cup on her lap and was staring dully at nothing in particular. She didn't seem to see him and he had to shake her a few times until she woke from her daze.

"Oh, it's you," she said laconically.

"I just wanted to ask you something. You sit here all day long, don't you? You know what's happening around here, right?"

"You're not the first one to ask me what's happening today."

"So, they're back in business."

The hunchback nodded.

"Do they have many girls here already?"

"No . . . not many . . . just a few." She sounded as if she had difficulty opening her mouth, she was so sleepy. "All these questions all the time," she said, "all these questions."

"Just watch out," he said. "The place will be hopping again in a few days. The old whores who were sent away and killed have been forgotten in the meantime."

Suddenly he noticed that she was no longer listening to him; it was like speaking to a wall. Her head had been bent down over her tin cup, and he felt as if she could fall asleep the next moment. She came to again when a passer-by jolted her so badly she fell against the door with her head. She blinked her eyes. "Was that the doorman?"

Ranek shook his head.

"I haven't seen him back here yet."

"He pushed me like that sometimes . . . the bastard." Suddenly she asked, "What do you have in the bag there?" as though she had noticed the bag only now.

"Apples."

"Apples?" she gasped. Her eyes widened; suddenly she had come alive. "Apples," she repeated, "my God . . . he's got apples . . ."

"They're good ones, too," Ranek said, grinning.

"What kind?"

"I'm not sure . . . but they're good . . . since they smell of orange peel."

"Oranges?" she said with a voice that trembled.

"Have you ever eaten any?"

"Yes, a long time ago. They grow in the south? Right?"

"Yes, in the land of eternal spring," he said.

"There was a species," she said, "Messina oranges . . . they're small and round ones, small and juicy and red as blood."

"You're right," he said, mocking her. "And there was another kind, called Jaffa oranges. They're big with a thick peel and not bloody at all."

"I don't know what kind," she said. "You seem to be very well versed, anyway. You're a cultured person, aren't you?" She flattered him: "I knew all along what kind of person you are. Never

judge by the exterior, I always say, right? If you're worth something you can wear rags. You find out who someone is by talking to him."

"You're completely right," he said, grinning, and he thought, Watch out, in a minute she'll tell you what she wants.

Her eyes had lost their dullness; she squinted at him teasingly, her glance slowly surveyed his entire figure and finally lodged near his thighs, and while she slowly lifted her soiled dress . . . until it was over her knee . . . and moved her emaciated legs coquettishly back and forth, she said, "You'll give me an apple, won't you!"

"Another time," he said evasively.

"That's what you told me the last time, too!"

"The next time that I happen to come . . ."

"I don't want it just for me. I want it for the child . . . I left the child back in the cellar, I—"

"The child croaked long ago," he said coldly.

"So you know?"

"You told me yourself."

"Oh my God," she whispered.

But suddenly she got to her feet. She took his hand and pulled him after her into the brothel's back yard. "There's no one here," she whispered.

"What do you want from me?"

"The apple," she whispered, and she assured him, "I don't want it for nothing." She lifted her dress up to her neck and looked at him provocatively, as if she wanted to say, "Now that is worth an apple!"

"I've seen that before," he said, and spat on the ground.

"We can do it next to the cellar stairs," she said. "If someone comes into the yard we'll still hear him in time; no one can catch us there." She continued hurriedly, "You don't have to worry about anything else . . . I mean about the clap or something like that . . . I'm clean, really . . . completely clean . . . and . . . about the hump . . . don't worry about that . . . it doesn't interfere."

She walked ahead. He didn't know why he was following her; it was insane.

She placed her tin cup on the stone stairs. "Wait just a minute," she begged, "I have to go downstairs for a moment." Ranek knew that the brothel cellar was a public latrine for the neighbourhood and therefore he asked no questions. He took a closer look at the back yard. The many empty clotheslines had not been taken down yet and looked superfluous, like a wire fence a madman had strung in front of the sky. He noticed an ugly, ravished-looking grey cat crawling out from under the wooden bench by the wall. The cat's existence struck him as just as senseless as the clotheslines. This damned yard looks like a symbol of our existence, he thought : the cracked wall, the sick grey cat, and the empty clotheslines. He spat again, turned around and looked into the cellar, but it was too dark, he didn't see the hunchback.

She was not long. Now he heard her breathing heavily as she climbed the stairs.

When she had reached the top step he asked maliciously, "Did you take a crap?"

"Diarrhoea," she grinned, "because your apples agitated me so. Will you give me an apple now?"

"No . . . not now . . . afterwards."

"Please!"

"You're trying to cheat?"

"No . . . not cheat." She hesitated. "I can't do it on an empty stomach."

"Nonsense!"

"Not nonsense. I'll faint if you touch me when I don't have anything in my stomach."

"I won't grab you as hard as all that."

"I don't mean grab. You know what I mean?"

"You can faint for all I care . . . at least you'll find out what a real man is."

"Please," she said again.

"Well, all right. But if you cheat you know what'll happen to you!"

"I won't cheat. Really not."

He gave her an apple. She took it with both hands and immediately started to devour it. Then she suddenly turned around

and staggered back into the cellar. Hesitantly he walked after her a few steps, but the stench brought him to his senses at once and he stopped short. The nausea was so strong that he could not understand how he had let himself be enticed to come here in the first place. He decided to leave. He hurried across the yard, but at the exit he felt sorry for the wasted apple. The money . . . the money in the cup, he thought; you'll have to hurry before she comes back. How could she be so careless? Leaving the cup standing there. She must be a little off her rocker too.

Mad! Completely mad!

He went back to the cellar and emptied the tin cup into his pocket. She won't even notice, he thought, she's so confused; she'll think she lost the money on the street.

He was about to leave when she returned. "Do you want to go already?"

"Yes . . . I thought it over . . . perhaps another time."

"Can I walk with you a bit?"

"Of course."

She now walked beside him. She hadn't seen the empty cup yet. She smiled bemusedly to herself. "I thought so at once that you didn't mean it," she said. "You don't look at all as if you still wanted something from a woman."

"You know your business, eh?"

"But you have to," she said, smiling. "I've had customers like you before. They're all the same. They don't really want to, but they like to pretend they do."

They stopped on the street. "Thank you for the apple."

He made a deprecatory gesture. "Perhaps I can do something for you some time," she said, "you never know . . . and when you need information again you can come to me."

She shook hands with him, and then she walked back to the brothel yard. Ranek bought himself some freshly cut tobacco. Then he went home without any further delay.

* * *

"Dvorsky was just here," Deborah said.

"I didn't know you knew him . . ."

"I know him."

"The wife too?"

"Yes, the wife too," she said.

"What did he want?"

"He was looking for you. But he didn't tell me why."

"Then I'll go over to his cellar right away. Perhaps it's something important."

Ranek handed her the food. "Wasn't a bad day." He grinned. "Cook something quick. Make a soup of the stuff. We'll save the apples." Then he left.

Dusk had set in rapidly and the street looked as desolate as usual at this hour. Occasionally the wind wafted a spine-chilling whimper out of the bushes . . . but that was only the live lamenting the dead . . . well-known sounds that softly stirred the quiet of the street, barely disturbing it, for they were part of the night.

Ranek stopped a few seconds in front of the cellar and sniffed the air like an animal. It would rain, he thought.

* * *

The rain drummed monotonously on the broken roof throughout the night. Occasionally a woman screamed in her sleep, and these thin, half-choked screams could be heard as far as the hallway.

It was morning and Deborah had been awake for some time when the door to the room was pushed open. A man stood motionless on the threshold. Deborah recognized him in the dim light: it was Ranek. Suddenly the terrified scream resounded again. Ranek closed the door and walked up to her slowly through the semi-darkness.

"It's still so early," she said to him.

"Yes, but one can't sleep with such screaming."

"I couldn't either."

Ranek sat down beside her. He lighted a cigarette and looked silently down into the stairwell. A square patch of twilight ground was visible through the hallway entrance.

"It's Moishe's wife who's screaming like that," he said after a while, "you know, the pregnant one . . ."

She merely nodded.

"At first I thought she was in labour," he said softly, "but then I told myself, That isn't possible, it isn't time yet. And then . . . that's not the way you scream if you're in pain . . . that's the way you scream in your sleep."

"Nightmares," Deborah whispered.

"Perhaps she's dreaming of the brothel," he said pensively. "She hasn't been back long."

"That is possible," she said.

"The people say quite a few things about her. They say the child is a bastard."

"Yes, I have heard that, too."

"A bastard," he said, "a damned bastard." And he added, Perhaps she's dreaming about her bastard . . . or about Moishe leaving her when she gets the little bastard."

Deborah gave a weak smile. "How can we know what she's dreaming of."

"Oh, well," he said.

"You never know what's going on inside another person and why they scream in their sleep."

"It's none of our business anyway," he said.

He noticed how she raised her head, listened, and stared at the door, but it had become quiet inside the room.

"Well, finally," he said.

She carefully took his hand; for a brief moment he felt her moist lips against his fingers while she took a drag from his cigarette, then she leaned her head back against the bannister.

Suddenly she said, "Last night when you came back from Dvorsky you wanted to tell me something, but then you changed your mind and went into the room. Was it important?"

"It was interesting," he said, and winked at her.

"Come on, tell me."

"Dvorsky and I made a deal yesterday." He took a deep breath and looked past her.

"We're going across to the Rumanian side tonight!"

She made a little frightened sound.

"Across the river . . . yes." He tried to grin. "How do you like that?"

"You know it means the death penalty. They don't let anybody across."

"We're not asking them, are we?"

"Oh, Ranek!"

"We'll just stay an hour or so," he said soothingly, "and then we'll come back. We're only picking something up, you understand? Dvorsky's a professional smuggler. You're safe with him."

I I

Ranek went to the fence precisely at the time they had agreed to meet there. The darkness protected him. Moon and stars were invisible and there was every indication that it would rain again tonight.

He started becoming impatient—there was no sign of Dvorsky. Ranek could have gone to the cellar and fetched him, but as they had made a point to meet outside by the fence so as not to attract attention to themselves, he stayed put.

He heard a pattering near the latrine; the sound approached, a shadow appeared out of the darkness, and now he recognized the shaggy yellow dog that had been scrounging around the yard lately.

The dog came up to him and started to whimper. "You hungry too?" Ranek whispered. "Come to the wrong address, eh?" He took a hesitant step forward, but the dog suddenly jumped away and disappeared in the dark, as if he knew what human beings can have in store for you if you don't watch out.

Ranek felt his nervousness increasing from minute to minute.

He wandered over to the ruin, came back, walked once around the latrine, approached the fence once more, and started pacing up and down. Where's Dvorsky? Damn it! He chewed some tobacco and while doing this considered the adventure that lay ahead of him.

Dvorsky had informed him yesterday that two acquaintances of his had tried to swim to the Rumanian side. Escape from the ghetto. Just as they reached the other side they were shot at by the machine gun on the bridge. One of them was hit and died on the riverbank, the second one swam back across. He had made his way back through the bushes and spent the night in Dvorsky's cellar.

The story was in no way unusual. It was not even interesting. The only interesting part was that the corpse had gold teeth.

"There are enough corpses," Ranek had said hesitantly at first, "even corpses with gold teeth. There's no need to cross the lousy river just for that."

"Idiot, we're going across because it's a sure thing," Dvorsky had replied. "Because we don't have to worry about competition, because no one's going to snap this inheritance from under our noses."

"A sure thing, in other words?"

"A hundred per cent."

"Are you positive the corpse is still there?"

"Of course. Who could have taken it away? Sometimes it takes weeks for the peasants to discover someone like that." And then Dvorsky had added lightheartedly, "I used to know the fellow. It literally gleamed when he laughed."

Now he heard hurried steps coming along the dark street. Shortly after Dvorsky stood beside him. He excused himself hurriedly. "Had to wait until everything was clear."

"Everyone asleep at your place?"

"Yes."

They walked carefully around the ruin, then the bushes closed over their heads. They kept to a worn-out narrow path covered with broken twigs. They were walking single file, Dvorsky always several steps ahead of Ranek. When the path widened,

Dvorsky waited for him and then they walked through the dark side by side.

After a while Dvorsky broke the silence : "You're a bit unsteady on your feet already." He cursed softly. "Man, we've got a lot planned for tonight. You better hold up your end. I'm depending on you."

Ranek felt how Dvorsky put something into his pocket : a piece of ersatz flour bread—old, hard, and dry on the outside but sticky like flour paste within.

"Sometimes you're really generous," Ranek snickered.

"Because I don't want to go alone . . . like the fellow who came floating into the cellar last night," Dvorsky replied.

"I won't let you go by yourself," Ranek snickered, "or do you think I'm about to conk out?"

"I hope not," Dvorsky grumbled.

The path suddenly lost itself in a thicket. They fell silent. It was difficult for them to find their way because this area was like a jungle and the black night was like a trap. At times they could hear snatches of conversations coming from the left, another time from the right, and it seemed as if these were the voices of the dead who had reawakened for one night. So far they had not encountered anyone even though the bushes teemed with homeless people and the soft voices from the various directions were real enough and not the products of their excited imaginations.

Suddenly Dvorsky stepped on a body. They heard an ugly squeaking. A flashlight lit up. The figure of a man rose out of the earth. "Who are you?"

"The same as you," Dvorsky said.

"What are you doing here? What are you walking around for?"

"We're taking a walk," Dvorsky said.

The man lowered his flashlight but did not extinguish it. Only now Ranek noticed a few children lying about the beaten-down underbrush, obviously the man's children. So Dvorsky had stepped on one of the children! A shattered pushcart was leaning against a bush.

"Turn the light off !" Dvorsky said now.
The man obeyed. "Where are you going?"

"That's none of your business."

"Are you really from here?"

"Do we look like tourists?"

"No."

"We're looking for someone," Ranek said now. "We're not from here. We're from town."

"You have a place to live?"

"Yes."

"Do you know a place for us?"

"No."

"How many children do you have?" Dvorsky asked.

"Five."

"And your wife and you . . . that makes seven."

"No wife. Just me and the children, only six."

"Only six," Dvorsky laughed. "Good luck."

They went on their way. Soon they reached the end of the thickets, came to a steep incline, clambered down it, and shortly after reached the flat bank.

It started to rain : not a cloudburst, like last night, but a fine steady spray that hung before their eyes like a veil. Ranek wrapped himself more tightly into his torn jacket, he pulled up the collar, as always when it rained, and he also pushed the hat down onto his face. He was walking beside Dvorsky, he was out of breath, his feet ached with every step on the gravel. Momentarily the light of a railway lantern flashed up in the distance, then it became dark again. Now they heard the rattling of a train : a darkened train that moved across the bridge. They met a few homeless ones, first only a few, then more and more . . . and they encountered long rows of them . . . people that sat or lay bunched closely together.

"They can be seen from the bridge?" Ranek said, as though he noticed this only now.

"The fellows on the bridge don't care about them."

"That close to the border?"

"That doesn't matter. They only shoot if someone tries to get

close to the bridge or cross the river. Otherwise they don't harm anyone here. Don't know why, but that's the way it is."

"But there have been a lot of roundups down here by the river."

"Sure, but that doesn't concern the guards on the bridge."

"Well," Ranek said, "I suppose that's right. Still, I find it strange for so many people to sleep here by the river. I'd prefer the bushes."

"That depends how you look at it. The police have it in for people who hide in the bushes. When they start something they always start first in the bushes."

"Yes, you're right. But, you know, I still wouldn't sleep down here even if I didn't have a place to stay."

Dvorsky suddenly pulled him to the ground. A searchlight had lit up the bridge and the glaring cone of light circled for seconds over the river, wandered across to the other shore, came back, scurried across the riverbank, turned around, illuminated a patch of sky, and vanished.

"Is it still far?" Ranek asked after they had got back up and were walking farther upstream.

"Not much farther."

"We're much too close to the bridge already."

"It just seems as if we are."

"Can't we cross here?"

"No. Or do you want to be swept away by the current? Just leave it to me. I know this lousy river better than you. There's a shallows a little farther upstream."

After a few minutes Dvorsky stopped. "Here," he said. He took off his shoes, tied them together, and slung them over his shoulder. Then he rolled up his trousers. Ranek did the same. He untied his foot rags, though this took longer than slipping out of a pair of shoes, rolled up his trousers, and then tucked the rags into his jacket pocket.

"You go first," said Ranek.

"Afraid?"

"You first."

Dvorsky waded into the water. He turned around once more

and saw Ranek still hesitating. "What's the matter? Don't start anything now."

* * *

The Dniester was still ice cold at this time of the year. The current was violent and a man with insecure footing could easily be swept away by it. The two men panted onward. Ranek stumbled often and had to hold onto Dvorsky, who kept pushing him away. When they had reached the middle of the river, the searchlight on the bridge was turned on. The light darted over the water. Ranek was so afraid he screamed something at Dvorsky, but his words were drowned in the roar of the water. Mad with fear, Ranek saw the light beam reach and fasten onto them; he heard the report of the guns and at this moment could picture himself and Dvorsky floating downstream like two dead fish. He held onto Dvorsky again and pushed his contorted face against his shoulder. Then . . . all of a sudden . . . the light beam danced close to them, Dvorsky pulled him with one wild movement underwater.

When they peered out again it was pitch dark. They put their arms around one another's shoulders and laughed like boys and felt as if they both had gone a little mad. Their bodies were smarting from the cold water, but that didn't matter now.

Another train rumbled across the bridge. There was a brief hoot, the rumbling came closer, then they heard it disappear in the opposite direction. The river rushing by was the only sound in the night.

They fell down exhausted on the Rumanian side; for a while they didn't move, their heads buried in their arms and then they slowly started to move their limbs to get their blood to circulate again.

The shore here consisted of a narrow strip of sand that rose gently out of the river. Behind this gentle slope was the road and behind the road were the fields. Sensing that they were so close to the broad, fertile fields intoxicated them briefly; they stared breathlessly across the land and their eyes became moist. They knew that the corn was not ripe yet. Only in summer did

it become as yellow as the sun and so high that a grown man could disappear in it.

"Come on," Dvorsky said softly, "or are you going to take pictures?"

"It's much too dark for that," Ranek replied, "and you . . . don't open your big mouth. . . you're just as sentimental as I am."

They got up and ran along the beach, keeping their heads low.

"Perhaps it's gone. I warned you."

"Nonsense," Dvorsky hissed, "he'll be there." They continued to search the ground. Dvorsky knew where, didn't he? There wasn't any way they could have gone wrong? Or was there?

It was only a moment before they found the corpse. It was lying on its stomach, the body resting on the damp sand while head and arms lay in the water. The man had been shot in the back. As he was dying he must have turned around, fallen forward, and slipped into the water.

A brook was splashing out of the nearby fields into the river. They pulled the corpse out of the water, dragged it to the brook, then along the brook to the road, across the road into the cornfield.

"No one will be able to see us here," Dvorsky said.

Ranek nodded silently. They had sat down next to the corpse and were resting. They looked with half-closed eyes at the willows that grew here and there along the edge of the brook and that the wind had seized and shook back and forth like rebellious women, and they listened to the rain splattering on the cornstalks and leaves and on the soft clay.

* * *

They had undressed the corpse and tied his clothes in a bundle. Then they laid him on his back. Dvorsky held a pair of pliers and a screwdriver in his right hand.

"Listen," he said softly, "you hold onto the head while I pull the teeth."

Ranek nodded. Reluctantly he held onto the cold, wet head. The dead man's features were invisible in the night. Better not to know what he looks like, he thought, at least you don't remember anything that way.

He pushed the head down with all his strength so that it would not slip.

"Can you do it without light?"

"Yes."

"The back teeth?"

"No, only those in front."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course. I knew the fellow."

"What about his back teeth?"

"Amalgam, worthless."

"You take a close look at your friends, don't you?"

"A thorough look," Dvorsky said.

Dvorsky sat down on the dead man. He looked like a big bug. "I'm starting. Have you got hold of him?"

"Yes. Get on with it!"

Panting heavily, Dvorsky extracted one tooth after the other. He kept pulling the dead man's head up and Ranek had to keep pushing it back down again, and while he did this he was overcome by the awful feeling that the corpse was defending itself against the hand violating it.

After Dvorsky was done, Ranek said, "A dentist couldn't have done better."

"Yes, I know my business."

"Did you get them all?"

"I took out more than I had to just to make sure. A couple of white ones, too. We'll sort them at home."

"Fine, give me a couple now."

"You can leave them with me. My pockets are better than yours. We'll divide them at home."

"No tricks," Ranek said threateningly.

"You can watch while I sort them."

The coffeehouse was completely full. Nonetheless, more and more people kept coming inside—beggars who held their hats shyly in their hands and whom Itzig Lupu sent packing again at once; others who sneaked up to the little iron stove to warm their hands or roast something on it; and some more or less well- or ill-dressed persons who just stood around waiting for a table.

The man at the table next to his, whom Ranek was observing so intently, was wearing a freshly ironed, light blue suit that looked as if it came directly from a tailor in Bucharest. The starched shirt, the silk tie, the pointed patent-leather shoes with the mouse-grey spats were also of obtrusive elegance. He was a fat, bald-headed man in his fifties; his heavy, slightly sweaty face with the small jowls, the double chin, and the sleepy blue eyes could have been those of any wealthy bourgeois; that is, if Ranek hadn't known that the man sitting so close to him was one of the most notorious black marketeers in Prokov.

Ranek already had a buyer for his gold teeth. The man was to meet him here at five. Ranek had made it a point to come somewhat earlier, drink a coffee by himself, and consider the question of the price once more calmly. Foodstuffs were preferable to cash. Let's say: a month's supply of corn, millet, potatoes? Some meat? Yes, meat too! Ranek asked himself whether it might not be better to offer the teeth to the fat man. He would be able to settle things quickly, before the other fellow appeared. He thought about this for a while but concluded that it would be

better to wait—the fat man had company with him and wouldn't be able to deal with him right away. Besides, if the deal with the other fellow fell through, there was still enough time to look up the fat man. He knew that he could meet him at any time at the Bazaar, at the barber's, or here in the coffeehouse. So he decided to wait.

It occurred to him that he could ask the fat man what time it was. He got up and walked over to him.

"Could you tell me what time it is?"

The fat man gave him a disdainful look, then he slowly pushed up the sleeve of his coat and looked at his wrist watch. "Ten to five," he said curtly.

"Thanks."

The fat man started to smirk because Ranek had not left but kept staring at the glistening silver watch. He pushed the sleeve up even farther and wiggled the arm a little as though he wanted to show Ranek the watch from the side.

"Do you like the watch?"

Ranek hadn't expected this question. "Yes," he nodded, "I like it."

Suddenly the fat man said, "I didn't steal it." The expression in his face was no longer friendly, and the eyes that had been sleepy a moment ago were piercing.

"I didn't say you did," Ranek said coldly. "I just wanted to know what time it is. I don't give a shit how you got your watch."

He noticed suddenly that their table was the centre of attention, but since he knew that the fat man wanted to create a spectacle just for the fun of it and was thus provoking him intentionally, he turned abruptly around and went back to his table. He knew all about such show-offs.

Ranek quietly sipped his coffee. He sat close to the window again as he had that time with Sigi. Once he happened to look outside and noticed a flattened-out face and a pair of hungry eyes on the other side of the filthy pane of glass, eyes that stared feverishly at his cup of coffee. He turned his chair away so that he now sat with his back to the window. There's no getting rid of them, either, he thought angrily.

In the meantime the group at the next table had left. Only the fat man had remained behind. Ranek could see him writing a few figures on a piece of white paper, brood over it for a while with a tense face, then crumple the paper and toss it angrily on the floor, only to pick it up again at once—as if afraid that it might fall into the wrong hands. Then he stood and walked with haughty steps through the room. People who stood in his way stepped respectfully aside; it looked as if they wanted to form a lane to let a king or a general pass through. That's a really big fish, Ranek thought, not a small fry like Dvorsky.

Now Ranek reached into his right jacket pocket. He had made makeshift repairs on it, using the simplest possible method: tying the various shreds together. The pocket had become smaller this way but at least one could put something into it now. He touched the teeth. They were mixed up in a handful of damp tobacco. He let them slip playfully between his fingers, then he pushed them into a corner, kept only the tobacco between his fingertips and rolled himself a cigarette.

Six gold teeth it had been: three for Dvorsky, three for him; then there had been the dead man's clothes. Ranek had immediately sold one tooth and his share of the clothes to Dvorsky since he had been hungry and wasn't able to wait. Of course Dvorsky had once again made the best of the situation and quoted him a price that was much too low: two loaves made of ersatz flour, a few sugar beets, some tobacco and a small sack of corn flour that wouldn't even last a week. Then, when he was about to leave, Dvorsky had pressed two one-mark notes into his hand. Except for the tobacco and the money Ranek had given everything to Deborah.

She already knew the whole story and in every detail.

"Was he really dead?" she had asked.

"Of course. Or do you think we pulled his teeth while he was still alive?"

"No, no, don't be angry. That was a stupid question."

"Well, then."

"What are you going to do with the rest of the teeth? Are you going to sell them to Dvorsky too?"

"No. He isn't going to get them. The prices he pays are ridiculous, as you know."

"Who are you going to sell them to then?"

"Don't know yet. I'm going to take a look around."

* * *

Ranek inhaled with obvious pleasure; he stared at the newspaper scrap as it slowly turned black, then he reached for the coffee cup and drained the dregs. He thought of how quickly he had found a customer for the teeth. He hoped it would all work out.

That afternoon in the Bazaar he suddenly caught sight of a man in the crowd who seemed familiar to him: a short man, with a sports cap pulled low over his shabby face. You met him once when you looked for Hofer in the red house; that's the guy who wanted to buy the schnapps from you, thinking it was oil. A crazy fellow. But he seems to have money. When Ranek started to talk to him, he was buying speckled beans. He had them wrapped in a cloth and stuck them into his pocket.

"Oh, it's you? Yes, I remember. Bought a few beans, as you can see. Beans aren't bad. They're a little noisy, but at least you know that you've eaten something, he, he." He laughed raucously and patted him on the shoulder.

"I have something," Ranek whispered. He lowered his voice even more: "Gold teeth."

The man suddenly was interested. "Show me!"

"Not here. That's impossible."

Ranek drew him to the side. "Are you really interested?"

The man nodded.

"I'm a professional middleman. I could use them for someone."

"When can you bring the man around?"

"Let me think now. . . ."

"Want to meet me in the coffeehouse later on?"

"Fine, in the coffeehouse."

"When?"

"Let's say . . . around five."

"That's fine. I'll be waiting for you."

* * *

He ordered another coffee. This time the wife of the coffeehouse owner served him. Her face was tired and washed out, but her eyes were appealing—they looked kindly at you from the centres of two fine brown nets of wrinkles. She was a little taller than Itzig. She wore a thin dress that had become a little too tight with time; if she stood close enough in front of you, you saw her nipples. Ranek knew that Itzig treated her like a servant.

She placed the cup in front of him, placed the spoon carefully alongside, and gave him a friendly smile.

"It's a little different when you get served by a woman," Ranek said, grinning.

"That's what all of them say."

"Your husband just puts the cup at the edge of the table and most of the time he forgets the spoon."

"Because he's impatient. I always pay more attention to the guests than he does. That's the way he is . . . his nerves are shot . . . nothing one can do about that."

Ranek placed the last one-mark note on the table. She put it in her pocket and was about to leave but she turned around so clumsily that she jarred the shaky table and the spoon fell on the floor.

When Ranek bent down to pick it up, one of the teeth fell out of his pocket. He saw the tooth roll to a stop near a table leg; he forgot the spoon and grabbed for the tooth, but the woman was quicker and beat him to it.

He gave her a look full of embarrassment as she picked up both spoon and tooth, placing the spoon carefully alongside his cup, the tooth next to the spoon.

Again she gave him her friendly smile, which seemed to say no more than: here . . . that's the spoon . . . and that's the tooth. As though they were one and the same thing.

He excused himself. "It was an accident."

She seemed astonished. "But it was my fault."

"I don't mean that... the spoon fell down; I mean... the tooth..."

"Oh, I see!"

"Did I frighten you?"

"No. Should you have?"

"I just thought..."

"You pulled the tooth yourself, didn't you?"

"No, it was loose, it fell out by itself." He gave her his big inexpressive grin.

"No need to feel embarrassed about that," she said, and put her mouth close to his ear. "You're not the only one losing his teeth."

She took a long inquisitive look at the tooth. "The way it shines!" she said admiringly. "Is that really gold?"

"Of course."

"You must have been well off at one time?"

"I didn't do too badly," he said. While he placed the tooth back in his pocket she looked shyly over to the counter.

"My husband's getting impatient," she said, but she seemed prepared to stay longer.

"Oh, let him be," he said. "You work more than enough. You shouldn't allow him to work you like that."

"He doesn't like it when I talk to someone for too long." She added roguishly, "Especially not to men. Sometimes there's no telling whether he's concerned about the time I waste or whether he's jealous."

"I'm sure he's jealous," Ranek said jokingly.

Giggling, she wiped with her rag around on the table top. "You're a regular, aren't you?"

"More or less."

"I mean because I've noticed you a few times before."

"Probably my hat?" he grinned.

"No," she said, "not only your hat." Her glance wandered from his face to his torn suit, back to his face.

"You are still a young man?" she asked somewhat uncertainly.

"What you call young," he said.

"Why don't you come when there isn't so much work to do, perhaps we'll be able to talk longer then."

"Gladly."

"I often go for walks," she said slowly, "towards evening. My husband has no feelings for things like that."

Ranek nodded. "I also go for walks," he said, "also towards evening."

"You can keep me company sometime," she said half jokingly.

"Gladly," said Ranek.

"Yes, that would be nice. But I really have to go now, otherwise he'll have a fit." She pranced off. He gazed after her. You might be able to get something from her, he thought.

Suddenly he heard someone shouting the owner's name. A woman stood at the threshold waving her arms excitedly.

"Lupu," she shouted again, "Lupu, Lupu. Come here quickly."

Itzig now shot out from behind the counter and disappeared with the woman out to the street. Something's happening again, he thought, shaking his head.

At this moment the man with the tilted sports cap entered the coffee-house. He was alone. He looked around the room and then came over to Ranek's table.

"Where's the fellow you wanted to bring along?"

"He couldn't come. But we can complete the deal without him."

Perhaps he's decided to buy the teeth himself, thought Ranek. Well, we'll see.

"Can one have a look at the goods?"

Ranek nodded, but then he saw Lupu's wife coming back, and he whispered quickly, "Wait a while."

While she cleared the cup away and wiped the coffee grounds from the table, he asked, "Why did your husband rush out on the street like that? Is something wrong?"

"Oh, it's nothing serious," she said.

"Well, what was it?"

"Someone died."

"Oh?"

"One of the people who spend the night here."

"A man?"

"I don't know. What does it matter. Someone, that's all." She complained, "We really have to worry about everything: now we're going to have nothing but bother with the burial."

"What about the place that became free? Has it been taken?" he asked cagily.

She gave him an astonished look. Then her face lighted up as if she had caught on only now. "Of course! Do you want the place?" She was really agitated.

"I'll talk to your husband at once."

"You better wait a moment. He's too busy now. I'll send him over to the table afterwards."

"Won't it be too late then?"

"No, leave it to me."

"Fine. Your word is good enough."

"A dark for me," the man with the sports cap said.

After she had left the man began to grin broadly. "She's really got her eye on you."

"Not at all. It just looks that way."

"People talk about her." The man bent forward a little and looked secretive. "She pays for love," he said softly, "you know what I mean."

"Yes, I got the message."

"She can afford to, too."

"Does the husband know anything about it?"

"He's all business. He doesn't watch her."

Ranek pretended to look with indifference at the damp table top and rubbed his bony hands against each other.

"She's old," the man said disdainfully.

"That's why she pays for love," Ranek said, smiling. "That makes her young again."

The man nodded thoughtfully. Then he asked, "Did you know the fellow she's been running around with recently?"

"No."

"A bald one," said the man, "and he was still young, a young fellow who was bald."

"She only takes young ones?"

"Yes, only young ones who are poor and haven't got anything to eat. She can get them cheap."

"What happened to the bald one?"

"I don't know. Perhaps she dropped him because he couldn't any more? Or he died? Or he got nabbed? No idea."

The man blew his nose awkwardly and wiped the back of his hand on the bottom of the table top. "So you really want to move into the coffeehouse?"

"Yes."

"You're not without a home, are you?"

"No . . . not that . . . just want to improve my situation a little."

"Who doesn't?"

Ranek nodded. No need for him to know that you're sleeping under the stove with Red or that you've been waiting for the places of the half-dead brothers by the window. Ranek reflected quietly. The people at the sanctuary had thought the two would die within a matter of days, but they had been wrong. Perhaps someone was slipping them some food on the sly? Hofer perhaps? In any case, they were still there. Should he keep waiting until they croaked? It wouldn't take much longer; a brief delay, that was all. But suddenly Ranek knew he would not wait if only because there was no doubt that you were safe at Lupu's during the roundups. For Lupu had bribed all the police. The sanctuary was a trap. Nothing else. And there was no depending on Daniel; how did you know you could get to him when you needed him most?

"I have a pretty good place," Ranek boasted, "but it's not safe enough for me. You don't have to worry about raids here at Lupu's."

"You're right. Nothing's ever happened at Lupu's. He's bribed every policeman, supposedly even the chief himself."

"The place has only a couple of drawbacks," Ranek said, "and one of them is that you can use it only at night. But this doesn't really present a problem since I'm hardly ever home in the daytime. Cooking, too, presents somewhat of a problem, but there are enough open stoves in the ruins for that. It's all right to cook outside during the summer."

"That's true."

"It's bad in wintertime," Ranek said, "but winter is still a long way off. No one can plan that far ahead these days. Lupu's place is fine for the time being . . . that's the main thing. It's good because you can sleep here without being afraid at night and that's more than a person can ask from life nowadays."

The man nodded.

"Don't miss the opportunity. You're by yourself, aren't you? You don't have a family holding you back?"

"I have a family," Ranek said.

"What are you going to do with them?"

"I don't know yet."

The man grinned and tugged at his tilted cap. "Where are you staying now?"

"Next to the old railway station. It's a ruin. People call it the sanctuary."

"I've heard of it. You don't pay rent there, do you?"

"No."

"You will have to pay rent here, of course."

"That can be arranged."

"You'll find a way, right?"

"You pay on time the first month," Ranek said, and smiled, "just to get in, and afterwards you go into debt."

"It's obvious you know what you're doing."

The woman now brought the coffee, but she did not stay long this time and hurried on to the next table.

"Shall we get down to business? How many teeth did you bring with you?"

"Two," said Ranek.

"Not more?"

"No. Just two."

"Let me see."

Ranek let the teeth roll like dice across the table top. The man inspected them closely. His face was impenetrable. For a moment it seemed to Ranek as if the man had adopted Dvorsky's features, except that his face was smaller and the chin more pointed. The man laid the teeth back on the table and took a long sip from

his cup. "I'm just the middleman," he said obligingly, "you know how the deal works? You give me the goods, and you get your money a week later."

Ranek screwed up his eyes. "That's news to me," he said sharply. "Since when are goods entrusted to the middleman? Middlemen merely find a customer and receive a percentage once the deal is settled."

The man became uneasy. "That's the way it used to be . . . at one time . . . that was the old method."

"Don't try to talk your way out of it. That's what we agreed on from the beginning."

"Agreed or not agreed : the fellow couldn't come."

"No goods without money!" Ranek said curtly. Ranek was positive the man had only come to cheat him and to disappear forever if Ranek gave him the teeth.

He put the teeth back in his pocket without speaking.

"What are you doing?" the man said uncertainly. "Don't you trust me?" He raised his hands imploringly.

Ranek suddenly bent over towards him. "Get to hell out of here!" he said threateningly. "And make it fast."

"I have only honest intentions," the man stammered.

"Fast!" hissed Ranek. "Before I have to help you, you bastard."

Ranek had got up furiously. The man too had risen. He stood beside the chair, his face sweating, and propped his elbows on the high back of the chair as though something had suddenly disintegrated inside him.

"Are you still here?"

"What do you want?" The man smiled weakly. "You've got to live. You've got to do something."

"Don't tell me any sob stories. Go!"

The man suddenly turned around and left. He did not look back.

Ranek sat down again. He noticed that there was some coffee left in the other man's cup. He drank it. The coffee was cold.

* * *

"My wife notified me just now that you would like to live here." Itzig Lupu twisted his hands in a businesslike manner. "Had the corpse taken away just now," he said, shrugging his shoulders while his small eyes darted back and forth in his lynx face. "He was a tenant here for quite some time . . . starved to death, unfortunately. Nothing one can do about that. He still owes me for a cup of coffee, which I gave him yesterday as a stimulant. Didn't help, though. Unfortunate, isn't it?" Lupu emitted a dramatic sigh. "I'm decent and I always give people who live here credit, but, as you can see for yourself, I never get it back."

"The dead pay no debts," Ranek said, smiling.

"That's the way it is," Itzig Lupu said. "So, to come back to the sleeping place"—he paused significantly—"the place is not bad, not bad at all. At the end of business hours the tables and chairs are pushed together, the floor is swept . . . we live here according to a system. Everything is done according to a plan . . . like a real home." He looked patronizingly at Ranek. "You'll sleep with a few other people under the tables. It's like sleeping in a four-poster."

"I would have preferred it on top of the tables," said Ranek.

"All you can get is what's free."

"Perhaps someone could switch with me? Upon your suggestion of course."

"No, that's impossible." Itzig shook his head energetically. Then he said cuttingly. "The floor is clean, I told you already! This isn't a pigsty."

"Well, if that's the only way."

"Rent : five marks a month. In advance, of course."

"Do you also take food?"

"No. That's too confusing. I keep books. Five marks, as I said."

Ranek knew that Itzig was lying and that he also took food, but that was all the same to him now.

"I'm expecting some money next week," Ranek said hesitantly.

"You'll have to wait until then."

"So sorry." The lynx face began to turn away. "I have enough people waiting for the place. All I have to do is move my little finger."

Ranek took out his two gold teeth, held them like diamonds between his finger tips, then placed them in the palm of the other hand and held them in the light from the window.

"You don't believe me, eh? Here take a look! What's that? Chicken shit? You'll get your money as soon as I've sold the teeth."

The lynx face smoothed out again and the voice became friendlier. "My wife didn't tell me anything about that. Genuine gold teeth! What do you know! But look, there's no depending on promises any more these days. What am I going to do if you disappear at the end of the month or if—God forbid—you passed away?"

"Really now, I must ask you . . ." Ranek interjected in an insulted tone of voice.

"You didn't let me finish," Itzig said, still in a friendly voice. "Please don't misunderstand me! If you gave me one of the teeth as a collateral the matter would be settled, right? Why make life so difficult for yourself? And as soon as you pay your rent you get your tooth back."

Ranek reflected. He was obsessed with the idea of moving. Although Itzig could pressure him with the collateral, he had to pay the first month's rent anyway. So it came out to the same thing. The only question was whether Itzig would give back the tooth. He had to take the risk. And then, he thought, there's still the woman! Get on her right side and keep her nice and warm as long as you need her! If she backed him up he wouldn't have many difficulties, he thought.

"Why do you have to think so long?"

"Here's the tooth," he said coolly. He twisted his mouth in contempt. "You'll get your money next week."

"I am sincerely glad that you have such trust in me," Itzig said enthusiastically, letting the tooth vanish under his dirty apron. "You won't regret it. Everyone here knows me. I don't make any crooked deals, I don't have to."

"I know you don't have to."

"You have to trust people!"

"Before you said just the opposite."

"What I mean . . ." Itzig corrected himself, "is that you have to know whom to trust and whom not to trust. I believe you have the right feeling for that."

Kiss my arse, thought Ranek.

"You won't regret it," Itzig repeated. His face became deadly serious. "Young man, the razzias will start again soon. You're safe at my place."

"If it weren't for that I wouldn't give you a penny for the place."

"I understand your point of view." He lowered his voice to a whisper. "I bribed all of them, every one."

"I know."

"There, you see!"

"When do I have to be here at the latest?"

"When it gets dark. We lock the door at night, then you won't be able to come inside. You can do what you want until then."

* * *

Out on the street he took the remaining tooth out of his pocket, spat on it, rubbed it on his sleeve until it gleamed, wrapped it in newspaper, and carefully placed it back in his pocket.

Ranek looked around for the fat black market operator but didn't find him at the barber's or at the Bazaar. Later on he tried his luck with the shoemaker who had bought Sarah's stockings. The shoemaker looked suspiciously at the tooth, whispered with his wife, and then came back shrugging his shoulders. "If you have underwear or something like that, then gladly . . . but something like that . . . no . . . my wife and I . . . we don't deal in that. Not kosher enough." He led him out of the room. He was a careful man. One of those types, Ranek thought angrily, who don't care how dirty the goods or how shady their past if only they don't look too suspicious at first glance. Ranek put the tooth back into his pocket and went home.

* * *

Deborah had prepared supper: corn-meal mush with sugar beets and a sweet drink derived from the sugar beets.

"Has Fred eaten?"

"Yes, Ranek."

They sat down on the stairs. They ate silently and stared out into the yard. It was a gentle evening that extinguished his memory of the rain and cold the night before. Ranek had always had a particular liking for this time of year. In the past he had liked to sit on the balcony on evenings like these and watch the sun setting behind the fish market. When the east wind blew off the meadows where he and Fred used to play soccer as boys, it brought the smell of camomile and freshly cut grass with it.

The food had driven the blood to his head. Deborah regarded him out of the corner of her eyes; his ashen face suddenly looked unnaturally red. He burped heartily and grinned at her.

"Did you like it?"

"Of course. If only we could have a meal like that every day." He scratched himself under his hat and laughed pensively, then he changed his tone all at once. "You didn't finish your corn? You are begrudging yourself food again."

"I wasn't very hungry," she lied.

He knew that she had saved her portion for Fred, even though Fred had already eaten. But Fred often got hungry at night and started whimpering and she could not listen to this. He pretended that he didn't know and merely said, "Well, in that case you can eat it later on."

He lit a cigarette for himself and leaned comfortably back against the banister. He smoked in silence, and when he had finished the cigarette and extinguished the charred piece of newspaper on the step, he told her what he had done in the afternoon.

Her face, placid and bemused until now, suddenly disintegrated, but she glanced past him as if she were afraid to look him in the eyes at this moment.

"I knew you would leave us one of these days," she said despairingly, "but I thought you would wait until Fred was better and could go out to earn something."

"Don't worry. I won't let you down. I'll keep supplying you with bread as best I can." He gave her a cigarette. "Take a few drags, that'll calm you down."

After Fred is dead you'll take her to Lupu's, he thought. You'll talk to Lupu about it . . . she shouldn't stay at the sanctuary . . . she'll be with you.

He said, "As soon as Fred can take care of himself again I'll take you both to Lupu's."

"Do you really mean that?"

"Of course."

"That is sweet of you."

"First one person has to go, then the others follow. It's always done like that. There's no other way. Or do you think there is another way?"

She shook her head almost imperceptibly.

"We're not safe here," he said. "They'll come one day and take all of us away. I don't want to wait for that to happen. That's why, you understand? You're safe at Lupu's. You understand that, don't you?"

"Yes, Ranek," she murmured.

"I'll fetch you, too," he said. "I've promised you."

"And Fred?" she whispered.

"Yes," he said, "and Fred."

She gave the cigarette back to him; he saw that her eyes were moist. "You know that Fred will have his crisis soon."

"Yes, I know."

"I've been counting the days on my fingers."

"Yes, Deborah, I know that you count the days on your fingers."

"It's going to be so frightening . . . without you . . . here alone."

"I promise you I'll come every day."

"Yes, and in the night?"

"But you're always alone at night."

"Not that alone! When you are in the room and something happens, all I have to do is call . . . and then you're by my side. But, if you're so far away . . ."

"You're behaving as if you'd never been alone before," he said jokingly.

* * *

When they stepped into the yard, the sky was as red as blood. A few isolated clouds sailed peacefully toward the horizon and it seemed to them as if only the clouds had a direction and a goal.

"Look, how beautiful!" he said.

She nodded wearily. "Yes, that is always beautiful."

She accompanied him a short distance. She took his arm on the street. She did this very seldom. It might be a way of saying good-bye or perhaps only a mute reminder: Don't forget us! Come back to us!

13

After she had turned back, he walked more quickly, since he was afraid that he might be too late. He stepped into a deep, hard rut at one point and turned his ankle, but he did not bother about it and limped and panted on.

The coffeehouse was still open. Since it was just being cleaned, the people who lived there at night were still squatting outside the entrance. Some stood about staring emptily at nothing in particular. A few children were romping in the dusty street outside the house.

Ranek was making his way through the crowd when a tall, broad-shouldered fellow who looked stronger than any of the rest and who was leaning lazily against the doorpost stepped up to him and said, "You're the new one, aren't you?"

Ranek nodded. "How do you know that I'm new here?" he asked. "Do you know everyone who lives here?"

"No, I don't." The man laughed. "Lupu described to me what you looked like and he asked me to wait for you out here, to show you around a little. You see, you'll be sleeping with me."

The man bent down to Ranek with a big smile on his face. Ranek

noticed a few flies sitting on his almost bald head, which had been corroded by pus boils.

"The fellow . . . the one who croaked today was your neighbour, was he?"

"Yes, that he was. Feiwei was his name. He ate swill. Come on! Do you want to go inside?"

"Are we allowed to already . . . ?"

"They're still cleaning up, but it doesn't matter."

They stepped inside. The air was thick with dust. A few half-naked, sweaty men who were busy pushing chairs and tables together came towards them at once. The sweeper also put down his broom and joined the others.

"Are you the one who paid with a gold tooth?" the sweeper asked maliciously.

"The news got around fast," the tall man with the boils on his head explained to Ranek.

"Was it a mola.?" one of the men laughed.

"None of your business," Ranek said.

"Let him be," the pus-head said good-naturedly.

"Protecting him because he's Feiwei's successor, are you?" the sweeper asked.

"I have no choice," the pus-head grinned.

"Does this guy eat swill too?" the sweeper mocked.

"Why don't you ask him yourself?" the pus-head grinned.

"Do you?" the sweeper asked Ranek.

"Yes, I do," Ranek said, "and if you don't like it, you know, don't you, what you—"

The guy with the boils drew him away from the man. "I like you. You've got it here." He pointed to his wide forehead. "Don't let anybody treat you badly! You're on the right track. Will you buy me a coffee? For the sake of being bed partners?"

"Happen to be broke at the moment."

The fellow with the boils smiled. "Doesn't matter. Itzig will extend you credit. He's got you in a bind anyway with that gold tooth."

"All right," Ranek said moodily. You have to, he thought, you're dependent on the fellow.

"We can go to the counter."

"Yes, to the counter."

"Don't pull such a sour face," said the tall man with his good-natured voice. "I'm positive you'll like it here with us; all nice people and you live so comfortably here."

As they passed the sweeper, the one with the boils called out to him, "Don't sweep up so much dust! Why didn't you sprinkle water on the floor first?"

"Sprinkle yourself!" the sweeper shouted back.

"At least you could have opened the window! What's the new fellow going to think of us?"

"Better if he gets the right impression at once!" the sweeper called back.

"Oh, that doesn't matter!" said Ranek. "Don't get in a fight over me."

"The dust will settle in a few minutes," the pus-head consoled him, "then you no longer see it."

Lupu's wife was the only one serving at the counter at present. They could hear Itzig rummaging about in the small kitchen behind the screen. The woman was cleaning the last cups and spoons of the day, and now, as she raised her tired face and caught sight of Ranek, a smile crossed her lips.

"We want some coffee!" the man with the boils said.

The woman was still smiling. Now she wiped her hands on the apron and stroked her hair.

"Well, are we gonna have to wait forever?" the pus-head said.

"The kitchen is closed," she said hesitantly.

The screen moved and was pushed to the side. Itzig stepped out of the kitchen in shirt sleeves.

"What's the matter?" he asked grumpily.

"He wants something," the woman said, and pointed at the man with the boils.

"Two coffees," he said.

"Nothing now," said Itzig. "You know the house rules."

"You know what I think of rules and principles?" the pus-head answered "I'll write them down on a piece of toilet paper for you to wipe your arse with."

"Opening his big mouth again," Itzig said to his wife. The woman whispered something into his ear and Itzig nodded thoughtfully, and while he hung a wet dish towel on the nail above the slop basin, he said to the pus-head, "I'm only making an exception because you're with the new one. But the coffee is no longer hot."

"We'll drink it as it is," the pus-head said.

"And who's paying?"

"The new fellow is paying," the man with the boils answered.

"You can note it down," said Ranek.

"Yes, do write it down," the pus-head said, grinning.

"Yes, make a note of it, Selma!" Itzig turned to his wife.

For a few seconds she rummaged desperately in the disorderly heap of loose writing paper next to the slop basin.

"With the pawn tickets," Itzig snorted, "under Goldtooth."

"I've got it already," she said, pouting.

"Two derris," Ranek said quickly.

"You might as well give us two whole ones," the pus-head said while pulling up a chair, a big smile on his face. He seated himself, his knees wide apart, and rested his chin on the low counter.

"Watch out! Don't come too close to the counter with your head! You're going to infect everything," the woman said anxiously. Then she and Itzig went into the kitchen to get the coffee.

"She tells me the same thing every day," the man with the boils whispered to Ranek without changing his position. "I've been hearing that for months."

"Why don't you wear a bandage?"

"Because there aren't enough rags in the whole world for me to keep changing bandages. I don't want to start. That way you have fewer problems."

"But the flies!"

"To hell with the flies."

"But the flies could get infected," Ranek snickered.

"Shit," the man with the boils said.

After they had drunk their coffee, they made one round of the hall.

"Our table is the sixth from the right. Remember that once and for all!"

"Where's left and where's right?"

"If you come in from outside the tables are always on your right."

"But not when I go out?"

"But you'll be coming in from the outside when you're coming to sleep. Get it? Always on the right! And you start counting at the door."

He showed him exactly how it was done, stopped in front of table number six, and said, "That's the one."

"Shouldn't we crawl down once just to see if there's enough room for both of us?"

"That's not necessary. You're no fatter than Feiwei."

Ranek nodded. For a second he thought of his brother, who was no fatter than Levy and who fitted exactly into the covert under the stairs, but then he thought that this comparison was an exaggeration.

"Couldn't I sleep next to the table?" he asked hesitantly. "There's plenty of room on the rest of the floor."

The fellow shook his head. "That looks roomy only now but you just wait until everyone is inside. The whole floor will be covered from the counter to the table."

No different than the sanctuary, he thought, except that everything is more disciplined here.

"In other words, I can be glad that I got a place under the—"

"You've more than enough reason to be satisfied," the push-head interrupted him.

"And what's the situation with the chairs?"

"Itzig doesn't let anyone sleep on the chairs. They're put on top of each other."

"What a shame."

"There's been trouble on account of the chairs, but Itzig won't give in."

"Too bad," he said, and then continued to investigate. "According to what system do people sleep here? Normally . . . or playing-card system?" He added with a smile, "Playing-card

system is when you sleep with your head at my feet and vice versa."

"We all sleep normally here," the pus-head said. "We're all normal persons."

"But don't you think we could try it the other way around?"

"You're afraid of my boils, eh? Just have to watch out we don't touch heads."

"But it would be simpler—"

"No, it's out of the question."

"But why? Just because the others do it like that? You don't give a damn about rules and principles."

"Yes, that's so."

"Well, then?"

"I don't want it anyway. I don't want someone else's smelly feet in my face. Come on!" he said suddenly as if he wanted to change the topic, which had made him more and more uncomfortable. "We can catch a bit of fresh air until he whistles."

"Who whistles?"

"Lupu. He whistles for us to come inside. Didn't you know that?"

"I never gave it any thought."

They walked up and down in front of the house. "Every so often I get myself a woman and take her under the table," the pus-head said with a conversational air. "Don't let it disturb you."

* * *

The people drifted into the hall. Itzig Lupu locked the door with a large, rusty key that he turned twice in the lock and then he pushed a heavy iron bar through the brackets on the wings of the door. The people stood around a while longer; only the small children were immediately put to bed by their mothers. The smaller children did not sleep on top of the tables, since they might fall off. The mothers laid them lovingly on the floor and covered them up, but some of them refused to fall asleep because the older children were still up. They started to cry. The mothers lost their patience and began to curse and slap, and

somewhat later on, after the children had calmed down a little, the mothers sang lullabies for them until all became still.

When it had become completely dark outside, Lupu placed a single lamp on the counter. Then he and his wife disappeared behind the screen. Soon they reappeared, dressed in nightshirts, and planted themselves stony-faced in front of the counter, where they stood for several minutes without moving or saying anything, like a symbolic admonition: it's high time now.

After the people had all settled grumpily onto their respective places Itzig's wife went back into the kitchen to eat a piece of chocolate and pretty herself up before turning in: she massaged her face with vegetable oil, since beauty cream was no longer available, massaged around the slack folds of skin under her chin, then she rubbed her hands with the oil, and when she was finished she put on a white night-cap.

Itzig had taken the lamp and was slowly wandering in his nightshirt through the hall, shining the lamp suspiciously into every nook and corner. Then he walked calmly back to the counter, waited until his wife came out of the kitchen, then put out the lamp.

Ranek twisted back and forth on the floor beside the tall man for a long time without being able to fall asleep. First there was the unspeakable stench from the man's head that did not let him sleep and, later on, when he had got used to the smell and had overcome the fear of being infected, it was the tightness around his heart, the feeling of being alien here, of which he became fully conscious only at night, that kept him awake. He remembered that once during a holiday he had slept in an expensive hotel room. It had been a good, wide bed but he hadn't been able to sleep simply because the bed was unfamiliar. A floor, too, has its peculiarities, he thought, and an unfamiliar floor is like an unfamiliar bed.

Finally, after he had tortured himself long enough, his great weariness overwhelmed him and he fell into a deep yet uneasy sleep, haunted by nightmares. He dreamed of a large wet head with flies buzzing around it, a head that pushed into his face with the flies getting caught in the bristles of his beard. And the

harder he swatted the flies the more thoroughly entangled they became in his beard. They burrowed into his skin and buzzed maddeningly.

Half asleep, he felt someone looking through his pockets, but he lacked energy to force himself to wake up completely. He dreamed he had just sold Sarah's clothes and brought the proceeds home with him. In his dream he saw himself placing a part of the money carefully under the brim of his hat and sticking the rest into his pockets. And he saw himself and Sarah lying down to sleep, and how they woke up the next morning and discovered that the money was gone. And he dreamed of the icy silence of the people. No one knew anything. No one. No one.

Then he dreamed of the flour sack. He heard Deborah's voice : "The flour sack has disappeared . . . Ranek . . . I don't know how !"

"I don't understand. I tied it on myself," he heard his own voice say.

"Gone . . . simply gone. I was sleeping with my head on the sack . . . I can't explain to myself how somebody could pull the sack from under my head without my noticing it."

Now he awakened. He slowly sat up and rubbed his aching temples. While he was staring dazed between the table legs into the dark hall the dream came back to him and he puzzled over it for a while. His thoughts became gradually clearer and suddenly he remembered something else : and he felt paralyzed by the shock.

He rummaged through his pockets, found his old pocketknife, the matches, tobacco, loose scraps of newspaper . . . only the little package with the tooth wrapped in it was missing. So somebody *had* looked through his pockets while he was asleep !

His fingers trembling, he lit a match and held it over his neighbour. The fellow with the boils on his head was lying on his stomach, his head buried in his arms, snoring. Perhaps he's just pretending, Ranek thought. He regarded him for a few more moments but could not discover anything to confirm his suspicion. In the weak glow of the match he was able to catch a glimpse of a few yards of the passageway but he could not see anything there either but sleeping, stretched-out bodies.

He held the match a little higher, his glance caught a few heads under table number five . . . and then, turning around, the motionless legs of the people under table number seven. Behind that nothing but sinister darkness.

Despairingly he groped around the floor, although he was certain that he had not lost the tooth, and then he got up and went to the counter to wake the owner.

* * *

Since he was afraid of lighting the lamp he lit another match.

He went behind the counter. He saw Lupu and his wife lying on a straw mattress. They were covered by a blanket that was too short for them and Lupu's hairy white legs and the spongy, varicose-vein-mottled legs of his wife stuck out from under it. In a low voice he called Lupu's name, but Lupu was fast asleep and heard nothing.

When he called a second time his wife awakened. Befuddled with sleep, she pushed her nightcap back and yawning stroked her well-oiled face. "Wait behind the counter," she whispered in a strained voice. "Don't stand around here."

He did as he was told. He heard her turning the tap, rinsing her mouth, gargling softly. Then she washed her face. Shortly after she appeared from behind the counter.

"It's me," he said, "the new one."

"Don't you think I recognized you?" she whispered.

"Can I light the lamp?"

"My God, no!" She lowered her voice even more. "I knew you would come. But you shouldn't have come this late."

She groped for his hand and drew him to the end of the counter. It was so dark all he could see was the shimmer of her white nightcap.

"I didn't want to disturb you," he said softly. "I—"

"It's all right," she interrupted him, whispering, "I'm not angry. But we can't make as much noise as this."

She was still holding his hand. "My husband is completely exhausted," she whispered, "but we have to be careful anyway."

"I want to wake him up."

"Are you out of your mind?"

"Something has happened?"

"You're trembling. What's the matter?"

"I've been robbed. My gold tooth is gone."

"Why, that's horrible!"

"I have to wake your husband," he insisted.

"It's no use now," the disappointed voice whispered.

"The people have to be searched. No one can be allowed to leave the room!"

"You can't do that now."

"But what should I do then?"

"Nothing at all now. I'll make sure that my husband takes the necessary steps in the morning. Don't worry about it. No one can leave as long as the door is locked."

He realized that she was right. Lupu wouldn't have done anything anyway now, and would only have been furious because of the disturbance.

"Why don't you be sensible," she whispered. She leaned against the counter and drew him to her against his will.

He felt her fiddling with the wire that was his belt. "I must give you a real belt one of these days," she whispered. "My husband has an old one he doesn't wear any more. What is the matter with you?" she said angrily. "Can't you forget the tooth? I told you that tomorrow morning I—"

"I'm no longer thinking of the tooth," he lied. "I'm not thinking of it at all."

"Why are you so awkward, then! Can't you untie the wire?"

"That's a little complicated," he said.

"Or don't you want to?" she whispered.

"Yes," he said. "I want to."

And he thought: She's a new meal ticket; you have to stay on good terms with her. Tomorrow she'll talk to Lupu; it's better if she does it than you.

"You see," the voice close to his ear whispered, "I'm not as bad off as you; I get something to eat every day . . . every day . . . but believe me, the likes of us don't get much out of life either these days. Do you understand that?"

"No," he said. "I can't understand that."

"Well," she said, "well. What's the matter with the wire?"

"I got it open," he said.

"Well, finally," she said.

* * *

She did not reproach him afterward. She did not even make an ironic comment. She said nothing at all. She behaved as if it were suddenly completely unimportant whether he had satisfied her or not.

"Can you get me something to eat now?" he asked. Without hesitating in the least she said, "Yes," as if she had expected this question.

They went into the small kitchen. The woman did not turn on the light until she had pulled the screen in front of the kitchen entrance, and even then she kept the wick turned low.

It was really an extremely small kitchen. You could hardly turn around in it. The kitchen table took up more than half the space. Two kerosene burners stood on this table, a can of ersatz coffee, and a box of saccharine. Next to the table stood a crate for dirty dishes—there were a few unwashed plates on it even now. There was no chair, but in the corner stood an old cupboard without doors which contained food, chinaware, soap, dishrags, and bundles of clothes.

The woman lighted one of the burners and set a pot of coffee on it to warm it up. She made a sign to him not to make any noise but smiled kindly. Then she went up to the cupboard, pushed a few dresses aside and fetched a loaf of black bread, cut two large slices off, and gave them to him. When the coffee boiled she took the pot from the burner and placed it carefully on the table. With her fingers, which still glistened with olive oil, she inspected a few dirty cups from the dish crate, and when she had convinced herself that they were too encrusted, she tiptoed back to the cupboard, searched for a while, and finally brought out one of the dusty cups she kept in reserve. "There are a few clean cups in the room," she said, "I washed them before but I don't want to go in there now."

"Yes," he said, "it's fine now."

"You like it?" she asked a little later after she had poured him a cup.

"Thanks . . . just wonderful," he said.

"You don't have to dunk your bread into the coffee; it's fresh bread."

"But I like dunking it anyway," he said.

"The main thing is it tastes good," she said merrily. She regarded him with a satisfied grin. But suddenly she flinched and swivelled her head in the direction of the screen, where scratching could be heard now.

"I didn't think he'd wake up," she whispered, going pale. "Usually he doesn't wake up!"

Then Itzig Lupu came inside.

* * *

When Itzig started to scream like a madman, a few people with dazed faces stormed into the kitchen.

"What's the matter?"

"A thief!" Itzig Lupu shouted over and over again. "A thief! A thief!"

Ranek stood beside the woman as though he was paralyzed. He was still holding the cup of coffee in one hand; he wanted to put it back on the table but couldn't. He held onto it like a sign of self-reproach.

At first the people did not interfere. They stood silently and still half asleep in the little kitchen and waited. A few of them had placed themselves in front of the exit, and a few others in front of the small window as if they were afraid Ranek might try to escape and as if they wanted to prove to Itzig Lupu that they were on his side. The woman's stammering and Ranek's hoarse, soft-spoken answers were barely audible during the cross-examination because Itzig Lupu's furious shouting drowned them out.

"What are you doing in my kitchen at night?" roared Itzig. "And you, Selma, why are you standing around like an oaf? Why didn't you call me right away when you caught him? Can

you pay for the bread you've stolen? . . . What? . . . No? And the Coffee? . . . Of course not! That's what I thought right away! . . . What's that you're mumbling? You didn't steal at all? My wife was so kind and invited you? . . . Is that true, Selma, you invited him? Did you do something with the fellow? What do you have to say for yourself? . . . You say he's lying? . . . I knew that all along. And you, you bastard, you want to accuse my wife of something like that? . . . What? . . . You don't want to at all. So you admit? . . . Well, then! . . . What's that you're saying? A gold tooth? Someone stole your gold tooth? And you want an investigation?"

More and more people had awakened in the meantime. They tried to come into the kitchen, but there was no more room. The screen was knocked over and fell with a crash against the counter.

A stranger, who had watched the scene from the very beginning, now said, "He wants an investigation and he's a thief himself. Have you ever heard of anything like it? The fellow wants to accuse innocent people. Throw him out!"

Now Ranek noticed the fellow with the boils on his head pushing his huge body through the crowd and taking up a position by the cupboard. Suddenly the old suspicion returned. Ranek staggered over to him. "Give me back my tooth, you bastard!"

The fellow pushed him back effortlessly, and when Ranek was about to renew his attack someone held him from behind.

"He's got the tooth," Ranek said bitterly.

"Try to prove it," the fellow said, grinning.

"There's nothing I can do about that," said Itzig, who had calmed down in the meantime. "I have no right to inspect people, only the police can do that." He added in an ice-cold voice, "Besides, I don't believe he had anything to do with it. Nothing like it has ever happened here before . . . we only have decent people living here."

The one with the boils gave a malicious bellow. A few people nodded respectfully at Lupu's last words.

"Get out of here now!" Lupu said.

"First I'd like my pledge back," Ranek said tenaciously.

"What pledge?" Lupu said.

"The other tooth!"

"What gall!" Lupu exclaimed, wringing his hands, and turned to the onlookers. "What a liar . . . sneaks into my kitchen at night, fills his gut, takes other people's property, and then starts talking about a pledge. Do you know anything about a pledge, Selma?"

"I don't know anything," the woman said timidly.

The crowd in the little room pushed together and Ranek's field of vision was now completely closed off. He heard the voice of the fellow with the boils coming from the direction of the cupboard: "Throw him out, throw him out!"

"Beat his head in," someone cursed.

"And he still owes me for two coffees from last night," Lupu exclaimed.

"Out with him!" several people shouted, people who had suddenly come alive.

"Kick him in the arse, Lupu!"

Ranek looked hopelessly around for the woman, but she had managed to slip away. He wanted to make further objections, say something just to gain time, but suddenly the mob propelled him out of the kitchen into the hall in the direction of the door.

Someone tore the iron bar from the door. There was a rattling noise. A thin voice called for Lupu to come. The patter of feet. Lupu said, "Here I am. Have you taken the bar off?"

"Yes, damn it."

Then . . . the sound of a key turning in a lock.

He wanted to go back. He did not want to go out on the street now. But there were too many hands holding him.

* * *

The door fell shut behind him with a crash. It's all over, he thought gloomily . . . all over, the end of another delusion.

He ventured a few tentative steps across the black silent street, but fear drove him back. Since there was absolutely nothing he could do now, he had no choice but to hide behind the house

and wait until the end of the night. He found a place where the wall jutted out a bit and there he squatted down, exhausted.

For a time he stared like a blind man into the endless darkness, then he closed his eyes because they suddenly began to smart.

14

The same night there was a roundup by the edge of the river.

Two big searchlights on the bridge kept the bank illuminated. The homeless people sat silently on their possessions. Their faces looked yellow and they themselves looked like deathly, weary actors under the stage lights. They did not dare move, even the little children kept quiet, as if hypnotized.

The people had no idea yet what was about to happen. They had been asleep and the glare of the lights had awakened them. The searchlights were frequently turned on but usually were shut off again after a few minutes. This was the first time the lights had been left on so long.

The people waited. What else could they do but wait? Then . . . all of a sudden . . . there was a warning signal, a call and the long rows came alive all at once.

But the warning came too late. You could see soldiers and policemen rush up from all sides and systematically encircle the hysterical mass and herd them together like cattle.

The roundup went smoothly. A few courageous ones who had succeeded in breaking through the cordon during the tumult and who had escaped into the bushes were quickly recaptured, as were a few desperate ones who had tried to throw themselves into the river. Soon a procession of loosely strung-out rows of people was marching along the riverbank to a place about a mile downstream where the thickets ended and where there was

a road that led directly to the railway station. With the people gone the riverbank looked as empty as if God personally had swept it clean.

At the same hour another roundup was taking place at the eastern edge of the ghetto. Once again the homeless were the ones who had to suffer. They were dragged out of back yards, courtyards, and hallways. Oddly enough the thickets themselves were left unmolested.

Those who lived in the bushes would say tomorrow, The bushes are safest after all. And the others would say, That was sheer luck. The bushes are usually first. Just wait until the next time.

* * *

Ranek, who had spent the night shivering in his hideout, knew nothing about the roundups. Only at dawn when he started on his way home he heard what had happened from a few early birds who were searching for cigarette butts in the streets.

* * *

The first thing he did when he got home was to go to the latrine. There was still enough room left for him. Two women were squatting apathetically at the near end of the long board, their skirts lifted up to their slack grey breasts. One of them had blood in her stool; the other's stool was normal. A little farther up along the board Seidel hunkered together with his oldest boy, who was whistling a song. When the boy caught sight of Ranek, he said to his father, "There's the man with the beaten-up hat coming back! I thought he'd moved out?"

Seidel shook his head. "You always keep coming back to the sanctuary," he replied to his son.

He waved to Ranek, who was balancing his haggard figure over the board. He greeted Seidel but did not stop because he had noticed Sigi and Mrs Dvorsky at the far end of the latrine.

Sigi's face grimaced with astonishment when Ranek squatted down between him and Mrs Dvorsky.

"Well, you're back fast?"

Ranek nodded. "Did Deborah tell you where I was?"

"Yes."

"It wasn't the right thing after all," Ranek said.

"Did they throw you out?"

Ranek made no reply.

"To be home is the best thing after all, isn't it?"

"Yes, that's right."

Mrs Dvorsky suddenly nudged Ranek. "Threw you out, eh?" she asked cagily, touching him with her bare knee. Nauseated, Ranek edged away from her. He now turned more toward Sigi and put his hand on Sigi's shoulder. "Has something become free in the meantime?" he asked softly.

Sigi shook his head.

"What about those two half-dead ones by the window?"

"You mean the Gottschalks?"

"Yes, damn it, haven't they croaked yet?"

"Not yet. You'll have to wait."

Ranek nodded silently. Meantime Mrs Dvorsky had dressed again and was about to leave; in leaving she turned her head once more and her malicious little eyes looked at him full of scorn.

When she was gone Sigi asked, "Did you hear what happened by the river last night?"

"Yes."

"Somewhere else, too, near the cemetery, I think."

"Yes, there too. But they caught most of them down by the river. Anything happen here?"

"No, we got off scot free again," said Sigi. "The police were in the back yard but didn't come inside. Not even in the hallway."

"Perhaps someone prayed for all of you," Ranek said.

Sigi grinned.

"Perhaps," he said.

It was almost unbelievable: Fred had survived his typhus crisis! His fever started to go down at night and next morning Deborah said that he was better. The news got around fast and people became curious and looked under the stairs.

"So he's really better..." Sigi had said, shaking his head, "and I was certain he wouldn't make it."

"Me too," Ranek had answered dryly.

"What's Deborah's reaction?"

"She's not even surprised."

"How's that possible?"

"Because she never believed he would die. She says she knew it all along."

* * *

Today they sat for a long time beside Fred. He was still asleep even though it was late in the afternoon.

"I've shaken him a few times," Ranek said, "but it was no use. He won't wake up."

Ranek tried lifting Fred's eyelids, but Deborah drew him gently away. "Let him be," was all she said.

"Does Hofer know that he's been fast asleep since yesterday?"

"Yes. He said it is always like that if you have had typhus. Some people will sleep for days on end. It's because they're so exhausted. He'll get over that."

* * *

Just now a man was dragging a corpse out of the room. Deborah and Ranek looked expectantly upstairs. The corpse was Benny Gottschalk.

The man dragged the corpse as far as the staircase and there he leaned it against the bannister. Evidently he had not found anyone who was willing to lend him a hand and now he was afraid of dragging the corpse downstairs by himself. The man cast a few uncertain glances into the hallway, then he pulled a scrap of newspaper from his pocket, covered the face of the corpse with it, and went cursing back into the room.

The corpse was leaning against the bannister like a very tired man. The newspaper slipped and fell into his lap. Now he looked as if he were passionately concerned about the latest war news for the last time in his life, even though such events had become completely dead to him. His legs dangled limply. Gradually his whole body began to slip, slide forward, fall head over heels down the stairs.

"I had to wait long enough for that fellow," Ranek said. "I'm going to reserve his place for myself."

"Put your jacket on it!"

"That's what I'll do . . . no one will steal that rag."

Ranek went upstairs. Soon he came back. His naked, sunken chest was covered with goose-pimples; he kept rubbing his arms, his chest, and his stomach. Downstairs he stumbled over the corpse, whose head had got stuck between two of the bannister posts right where the stairs suddenly ended, as if they had been sawed off.

He noticed how Deborah turned her back on the corpse as if she did not want to see him. She was holding Fred's hand; with her other hand she kept stroking his sleeping face.

"You'll wake him up," he teased her.

She now turned around to him. "Did you reserve the place?"

"Yes."

"Ranek . . ." She hesitated. Then she said slowly, "I'd like to ask you a favour."

"Out with it!"

"Can you help me carry Fred upstairs later on? He's over his fever already and he doesn't have to stay in the hallway any longer."

"I hadn't even thought of that," he said.

She had got up and joyfully grasped his hands; her face was filled with bliss. "Finally he'll be among people again," she said, "no longer so alone and buried under the stairs . . . I've waited so for this moment, Ranek, so very much."

"It's almost unbelievable," he said shaking his head. "He lived like a dog under these damned stairs, worse than a dog."

"He's going to live like a human being again," she said, and the way she said it seemed to him as if she really believed this, and she almost convinced him, too.

"And sleep like a human being," he said, "like one human being with other human beings."

Then he suddenly remembered that in their elation they had both forgotten the most important thing.

"Where are you planning to put him?" he said, smiling weakly.

"You'll sleep together," she said, ". . . in the place you reserved. It'll work somehow."

"How? Neither of us will be able to move."

"It has to work!" she said.

"Another place will soon be free next to mine," he suggested, no longer sure of himself, ". . . the dead man's brother, he's dying too. Fred can wait until then."

"Fred can't wait," she said.

"All right with me," he grunted, "but I want you to know that I move around a lot in my sleep and that I'll push Fred, and Fred is still very weak."

"That doesn't matter. The main thing is that he gets out of the hallway."

Ranek was undecided. Her eyes glowed, were fixed on him, and he felt that something inside him was going soft and giving in. His glance fell on the corpse whose grinning face still hung between the bannister posts. But this sight did not help either. If you take Fred to your new place, he thought, then Deborah will have to stay out here by herself. That's not the right solution either, damn it.

He turned back to her and then he said abruptly, "The two of you can have my place . . . you and Fred!"

"And you?" she said.

"Don't ask so many questions," he said roughly.

* * *

It was not easy to carry Fred upstairs. They had to put him down almost every two steps, so it took them a long time. Through the half-open door the people in the room finally noticed what was happening.

When they got to the landing, Red and a few other men were blocking their entry.

"They didn't even ask for permission," Red said to the men. "They seem to think they can do as they please."

"Down with him!" one of them said threateningly to Deborah.

"He's healthy!" Deborah panted. She was barely able to keep her hold on the weight. "He is healthy. He has the same right as you!"

"I can't hold on any longer," Ranek whispered to her. His face was ashen and distorted. Not now! she thought. Don't put him down now! But she was also at the end of her strength. And they put Fred down again. Fred was asleep . . . and did not feel anything . . . and did not know anything.

"He is healthy!" Deborah said again. She had placed herself at the banister and stared feverishly at the men. Her dress, soaked with sweat, had slipped on one side and revealed her pointed, angular shoulder. "He is healthy!" she said again and again; she did not pant any more, she was saying it softly now . . . but it sounded like a scream.

Don't let her do anything foolish now, Ranek thought. For the time being he remained quiet and waited. He noted how her eyes began to flicker with excitement and how she kept glancing back and forth from Fred to the door, and suddenly he could not suppress the feeling that she would lose her head and in her desperation try to transport Fred into the room without paying any heed to the men.

He could see it coming: she would grab Fred under the arms and drag him in the direction of the door . . . the half-open door,

which was so close. She would push the dumbfounded men aside and lurch with Fred across the threshold . . . across the threshold.

However, nothing happened. Thank God, he thought. That would have been insane.

"I'm really sorry," Red now said to her. "I can understand you . . . he's your husband . . . but you must understand us, too."

"Understand what?" Deborah breathed.

"Your husband's clothes are full of contagious lice. That's dangerous for us."

"Down with him!" one of the men said again.

It began to look as if the men would take hold of Fred, but Ranek placed himself in front of him. He said something finally; his voice was very hoarse again. "What's that you're saying about lice?" he said to the men. "His lice are no worse than your lice!" He took a deep breath. Suddenly it became very important to him that Deborah and Fred got the dead person's place. He had promised this to Deborah and he wanted to keep his promise. "Deborah has disinfected his clothes," he said. "She did a good job; Red saw her do it yesterday, why don't you ask him! And if he has lice again, then they're healthy lice that he got in this place . . . from you. You can believe me. Fred is in good shape now."

"You've got a pretty big trap," a man who stood next to Ranek said. "You're acting as if you know for sure something that can never be known for sure. He could still have sick lice."

"Right," someone else said, "he's got a big trap."

"He's trying to outwit you," Red said.

More people came into the hallway; they cursed and screamed and clenched their fists.

"They're going to harm him!" Deborah whispered with fright. "Come let's carry him down again."

* * *

Fred had awakened once but had fallen asleep again immediately, he was so weak.

They carried him down and placed him under the stairs again.

"Don't take it so hard," he said to her softly. "We did the best we could. We couldn't do more."

"Yes," she said laconically. Her face looked very tired. Suddenly she leaned against him, exhausted, and for a short while he held her quietly in his arms.

She is only tired now, he thought, and sad because people are so hard. She'll get over it. Deborah won't give up. If she can't care for him up in the room she'll simply care for him downstairs the same as before. Until he doesn't need it any more. All she knows is her duty. She is fulfilling her duty to Fred and she'll do that until the last hour.

"Deborah," he said, "you're all right."

16

To Ranek's left lay a man with a wooden leg. From the expert way in which the wooden leg was attached to the stump of the man's thigh, one could tell that the man had purchased it before he was deported. Perhaps he had been wounded by members of the Iron Guard shortly before the attack on Russia, when the first pogroms started in Rumania? There was no telling how he had lost it. Perhaps it had been only an accident? Things like that still happened.

The cripple's clothes were in better condition than Ranek's. One of his trousers legs was always rolled up, perhaps so that it wouldn't chafe against the wooden leg. In other words, he was somebody who was prudent.

He had an uncommunicative face. Ranek had tried talking to him a few times, but without success. Evidently he was the type that wanted to be left alone at all costs. Their shoulders would touch when they both lay on their backs, but they did not care and pretended not to noticed. And certainly, it was no reason to start a conversation.

Leo Gottschalk lay to the right of Ranek, farther toward the platform. Since his brother had died, Leo always slept on his side as if he were suddenly afraid of lying on his back, like a bug that lies on its back only when it is dead.

Leo relieved himself where he lay. Sometimes he used the primitive chamber pot of rusty tin that Ranek had put beside his place, but usually he didn't have the strength and simply did it into his trousers.

Ranek once tried speaking seriously to him about this problem, even though he knew it would be in vain. "Listen, Leo," he said to the half-dead fellow. "I make you a gift of that chamber pot to shove under your arse, *kapish*? I'll even empty it for you. We have to keep our places clean!" And then he had snapped at him, "I'll break your neck if you shit in your trousers again."

Ranek remembered that Hofer had once said to him that everything in this world also had its opposite. His place had certain disadvantages, no doubt, but it also had its advantages, and one had to be blind not to see them.

One advantage was its being situated right underneath the window sill, so that all he had to do was reach up to get hold of the kerosene lamp; this way he avoided the strenuous walk through the dark from the door to the window. This place was also more comfortable than the one under the stove, he no longer scraped his legs sore on the stove legs, and the greatest advantage of all was that he no longer had to have anything to do with the bug-eyed redhead. That was worth something, indeed.

Ranek was squatting under the window sill, smoking, the cigarette, as usual, stuck sideways between his lips. He had pushed his hat comfortably onto the back of his head and was staring pensively at nothing in particular.

In the long run no one could endure it lying next to Leo, he thought, but you had to keep in mind that Leo didn't have long to live and that you'd be rid of him soon.

He blew the smoke playfully over his right shoulder and observed the twitching shadows the lamp cast onto the floor. Yes, damn it, he thought, you've no right to gripe about your

new place. Be glad you have it. Had to wait for it long enough.

He was sick of wandering back and forth, always changing sleeping places. He would stay right here. That was settled. Perhaps something would become free up on the platform, upstairs among the privileged, where it was dry, but he couldn't care less. He wasn't going to change again.

What an odd feeling that was you had a place of your own again. The people would see him lie in the same place now every evening, and they would become used to this, and finally they would come to respect his place. They would say to their neighbours: Don't sit over there! That place belongs to the fellow with the battered hat! It was like a piece of firm ground under one's feet: you suddenly knew again where you belonged.

* * *

One night Deborah came to him.

He had not been asleep. He heard the door open softly and knew at once it was she. He heard her clamber across the many bodies. She did not call his name until she was near the window.

"What's the matter?" Ranek called back into the dark. She groped her way through to him and kneeled down. "What's the matter?" he asked again. "Did Fred have a relapse?"⁹⁰

"No," she whispered, "there's nothing the matter with Fred . . . but outside . . . outside on the street."

"What about the street?"

"A razzia . . ." she stammered.

"You're seeing things."

"No, Ranek. They're standing over there by the old railway station. I saw their flashlights . . . I saw them."

"Don't talk so loud," he whispered, "or the people will wake up and make a fuss and those fellows out there will notice us for sure." He had just sat up. He was wide awake now. "This is not the first time the police came round here," he whispered. "Perhaps they'll take off again? Perhaps our luck will hold out?"

She nodded silently. She stared at Ranek though she could not

see his face, she only stared at the shadow that contained his features and she waited for him to say something more. Then she saw Ranek flinch and look towards the window.

She was about to say: I didn't hear anything, but instead she said the next moment, "Now I also hear them. They're in the yard. They're coming."

He took her trembling hand into his and caressed it mechanically. Why is it you're so quiet? he asked himself. Doesn't it matter any more to you? Or is it only . . . because she is with you? Because you suddenly know that she needs you? And because you've never known it as much as now?

"Fred is alone outside!" she said suddenly, and tried to extract her hand from his.

"Stay here!" he said. "Don't go away." He clasped her hand more tightly and was determined not to let it go.

"Let me go," she said, ". . . please."

"You knew he was alone outside. Why did you come here at all?"

"I don't know," she breathed, "I don't know, Ranek. Let me go!"

Because you also wanted to be with me, he thought, just as you want to be with him at the moment of danger. But you can't be here and there at the same time. That's obvious. But he said none of this out loud. Now he only said, "You can't help him now. Stay here."

"He's afraid," she said.

"I know," he said. "Everybody's afraid. Aren't you afraid too?"

"Yes," she said, "but that's different. You don't know what it's like to lie alone under the stairs and to know that you still can't walk. That is awful, Ranek. We at least can run away!"

"Where?" he said derisively.

"But, Ranek!"

"Actually he should be back on his legs by now. I have no idea what's the matter with him."

"Yes, Ranek."

"Perhaps because he's lost the will to live?"

"He'll recover. It just takes time. It used up all his strength."

"Let's hope they don't see him. He should just lie quietly under the stairs and not try to crawl away."

"The fence boards!" she said suddenly.

"It's too late for that," he said. "There's no time to conceal him now. You should have called me earlier."

Someone had smelled a rat. The two of them suddenly noticed that someone had opened the door a crack. The man who stuck his head out to listen pulled back at once and started to shake people awake.

"Stay here!" Ranek whispered again. "Don't go out now!" It was superfluous; she stopped trying to free herself from his clasp as soon as she knew that the police were in the hallway downstairs.

At this moment a tumult broke out in the room. The people staggered up with high hoarse screams and tried to flee under the platform. There was not enough room for everyone. The pushing became dangerous. Some people had been dragged under by the mass and were flailing on the ground, stepped on by many feet, unable to get back up; some were beating with emaciated, feckless fists at everything around them, and others tried to scratch or bite their way to wherever they wanted to get in the dark.

Ranek jumped up and drew Deborah away with him . . . to the platform, but he realized at once that it was no use and he pulled her back again. So they both cowered down by the window. And they did not let go of each other. They held hands like two children in the dark who know that they belong together.

* * *

The door flew open and slammed against the stovepipe, collapsing it.

A solitary policeman stood on the threshold; the rest were still milling about downstairs. One could barely make out that it was a policeman because he stood behind the beam of his flashlight. A cloud of black soot crept out of the broken stovepipe and crawled slowly through the room, and just as slowly, as in a

slow-motion sequence, the yellow light moved over the breathless mass of people on the floor, danced briefly over the bare walls, illumined the coat hooks for a few seconds, darted across to the other wall, continued its journey across the platform, which was almost empty now.

Sigi had stayed on the platform. The light settled briefly on his pate as if the cop had noticed something special about it, then it clutched his frightened face, felt it . . . and suddenly let go of it.

Then a horde of policemen rushed into the room, all of them holding flashlights, and the room was suddenly as bright as day.

At first no one said anything. It was the same old game with the flashlights, a game without words.

Again you could hear heavy boots treading their way upstairs. Two Rumanian soldiers appeared at the door; they had taken their rifles off their shoulders.

"We've got all of them together," the first policeman said to one of the soldiers.

"You counted them?" the soldier said.

"No, there are too many of them," the policeman replied grumpily.

"No need to anyway. All we need is ten."

The policeman nodded indifferently. He had an arrogant face; he said something to the soldier, so softly it was incomprehensible; the soldier nodded and now nudged the other soldier, who stood as if at attention, staring into the room with clenched lips.

"Let's go. Ten people!" The first policeman shouted. "Ten people step forward! Did you hear?"

His glance darted back and forth through the deathly quiet room. The other policemen watched him; they were standing near the stove and were waiting for him to give the signal.

"Who volunteers?" the first policeman shouted.

What a joke, Ranek thought, who would volunteer to be transported to his own death! He tried to press himself even closer to the floor, hoping they would overlook him. But everything had become very tight and he could not lie down flat any

more. He noticed that he was still holding Deborah's trembling hand in his. He wanted to let go of it now, but suddenly he was afraid of making even the slightest move with any part of his body that might be noticed. He felt a peculiar tearing in his veins and he could hear his heart pounding unnaturally loud and strong in his chest, and he had the feeling that this pounding could be heard all the way to the door. Where's Daniel? he thought. Why hasn't he come? You wouldn't have to be afraid of anything if he were here. His thoughts hammered: Where is he? Where is he? And then the hammering of his thoughts suddenly stopped. And it was as if his heart had stopped beating too.

Then it started. The policeman divided up and now proceeded to flail with sticks at the entangled mass of bodies, on the helter-skelter of blankets, legs, heads, arms. They flailed at everything on the floor and under the platform. Bodies leapt up and crumpled, others rolled around, their limbs jerking, lifting their arms and screaming. Other people had staggered up and tried to break down the wall by throwing their bodies against it, others lay bunched up under blankets or cowered behind their neighbours' backs.

Sigi had disappeared from the top of the platform. He had leaped down and hidden under an unconscious body that lay on top of him now. Moishe had thrown himself on top of his wife, trying to keep the pregnant woman from being beaten. He seemed to have forgotten that he had beaten her not long ago himself and that he was protecting not only her but the illegitimate child as well. He lay on top of her, sobbing, with strangely twisted limbs; to a disinterested observer it might have looked as though he wanted to get her yet another time with child.

Ranek received a boot in his stomach. He let go of Deborah and turned over once in pain.

* * *

It was all over.

They had only taken men this time. Ten men. All of them young.

The men had screamed and wailed and begged but it had been no use. They had been dragged across the floor and then downstairs. A short while afterwards one could still hear their screaming in the yard, then screams from the street and then they became more and more remote until they disappeared somewhere in the night.

It was quiet in the room. No one turned on the lamp. A cigarette glowing under the stove was the only light. Someone whispered next to Ranek, "They could have taken all of us."

"No," Ranek said, "that wasn't a real razzia." He felt his stomach. The kick hadn't been so bad after all; he could feel no pain now.

"Yes, you're right," the stranger said hesitantly.

"They just need a few construction workers, that's all."

"Did you hear how those fellows screamed? As if they were being sent to the Bug. Only the ones who are sent to the Bug scream like that"

Ranek laughed softly. "Perhaps they think they're being sent there? Not everybody can think as logically as we can after everything is over."

"Yes, you're right," the man said again.

"We're rid of the fellows once and for all," and Ranek.

"You think so?"

"Yes, those apes are much too stupid to talk their way out of it. They'll shoot them later on when they no longer need them."

"That's true . . . A good thing it wasn't a real razzia," the stranger sighed with relief.

* * *

With time the people groped their way back to their respective places. The light was also turned on again.

Ranek had not looked out for Deborah since he had been kicked in the stomach. Now he noticed that she had left the room. He was about to go and look for her outside when he saw

her storm in. Her face was completely distraught. He ran towards her. "Fred is gone!" she moaned. "They took him away."

"That's impossible!" he blurted out. "Fred can't even walk. He must have crawled out into the hallway and hidden somewhere."

"No... I looked already... behind the house... in the yard..."

"They can't use Fred as a labourer," he said, "and besides they only wanted ten men. I bet they just wanted to have their fun with him... one of their crazy jokes, that sort of thing happens all the time, he's probably lying somewhere on the street."

She nodded. She was not crying. She only said, "Come! Help me look for him!"

Anyone who can't walk is killed on the way, he thought, but perhaps it was really just a joke.

"I bet," he said again, "it was just a joke."

They searched once more in the vicinity of the house, but there there was no trace of Fred. They stepped out into the street. Suddenly Deborah started running.

* * *

They found him at the first intersection. He lay in the middle of the street, bleeding and unconscious.

"It's just a light head wound," he said to her. He waited until she had wiped the blood from his face. Then he said, "Be glad they only beat him up."

"Those beasts!" she said. "Those beasts!"

"What do we do now?"

"We have to carry him."

"Perhaps we should wait until he comes to? We'll prop him up and walk back with him?"

"No, we'll carry him," she said decisively.

* * *

Fred had been lying under the stairs again for a considerable

time when the sanctuary was stormed by a crowd of homeless strangers. The homeless ones were well informed and knew that a number of places had become free. They had lain in wait in the bushes until they felt quite certain that the police would not return, and then they had launched their attack. First they had milled around under the window, thrown stones against the cardboard pane. Then they had entered the hallway and demanded to be let in. . . . They were armed with sticks. They pushed up the stairs and beat wildly and desperately at the few people who tried to block them.

The fight did not last long. Soon the ten free places were occupied again and the rest of the horde, who had not found room, left, cursing loudly.

Ranek had not interfered. It was all the same to him who got the places. He only regretted that Deborah had preferred to remain outside with Fred even though he had tried to persuade her to come into the room.

He now extinguished the lamp, but it took a while before the noise abated—the new occupants were being constantly provoked. You could hear insults and curses in the dark, every so often something was thrown and smacked against the wall or the floor, but gradually the people calmed down. There was not much left of the night, and they wanted to catch at least a few hours of sleep.

* * *

He could not have slept very long—it was still pitch dark when he awoke. While he rose to his feet, half in a daze, he felt that his trousers were wet. This awakened him completely. Cursing, he now inspected his jacket—he hadn't spread it on the floor, but had kept it on and so it had remained partially dry.

He shook Leo. "You filthy pig," he hissed, "god-damned pisser!" Leo murmured something in reply and tried to raise his body but fell back without strength.

"Afraid, are you?" Ranek said. "Watch out! We'll make short shrift of you now!"

He got up furiously. That fellow has to get out of here, he thought. Best thing is you do it now yourself. Drag him out onto the landing. He reflected briefly. Leo was much too weak to defend himself. But he was still able to crawl. And he would crawl back. So down the stairs with him, he thought. You'll put him downstairs in the hallway. He won't make it up the stairs by himself. He hasn't the strength.

Ranek bent down and grabbed the legs of the half-dead man; he waited for Leo to kick, but Leo did not kick; he suddenly felt as if Leo were paralyzed with fear; he didn't even whimper. Ranek let go of him again. How many qualms you still have, he thought. He stood undecided in the dark. His hands groped for the lamp, took it down from the window sill, but he put it back immediately, as if he were suddenly afraid to see Leo's face in the light . . . You'll soon be rid of him anyway, he thought, it won't be long now. Let him be.

He shuffled to the stove to fetch a rag to dry his place, groped about around the stovepipe, where the rag hung usually, but could not find it. Again he cursed softly to himself. It came back to him now that the stovepipe had collapsed before and had been repaired afterwards but that no one probably had thought to replace the rag.

He searched around the stove itself, then felt between the bodies of the people sleeping near it, but with the same negative result. Why don't you turn on the light? he thought, but then he remembered that he would only have a fuss with Red if he put a light next to the stove at this hour, and, besides, it wouldn't be any use—somebody was bound to be sleeping on the rag if it had fallen on the floor.

He squatted down beside the threshold because he did not feel like going back to his place. He did not feel tired, either. Soon it will be day, he thought; soon it will be day.

* * *

He tried to pass the time smoking, but time seemed to be standing still again. He became more and more restless. That's un-

bearable, he murmured, and suddenly caught himself thinking of running out, as Rosenberg had done when he could no longer stand it inside. But he did not open the door. No, not that. You haven't reached that stage yet.

He walked up to the platform and groped along its edge like a sleepwalker. You can move about inside as well if you just try; that's still better than simply sitting in the same place. He felt himself becoming a little less nervous.

Ranek now lighted a match, illuminating the many legs. At about the centre of the platform he stopped suddenly. That's her, he thought, the one who sleeps the wrong way round, the only one who dares do that up here. You haven't thought of her for a long time. He held the match close to the woman's head, so close it almost singed her thick long hair. Now the memory of Rosenberg flashed up in his mind and he saw him standing next to him and heard Rosenberg's voice say, "That's the long-haired one."

The match bent slightly and flickered more strongly. The woman had a broad, bony face. She was snoring slightly because she lay on her back, her mouth open. She had strong beautiful teeth; the lips were a little too thick. The match burned out slowly. It became pitch dark again. The sleeping face disappeared; it had slipped back into the night like an apparition.

He remained standing there for a long time and stared at the spot. Finally he could not resist it and lighted a second match. Again he held it close to the head but this time the woman woke up. She opened her eyes with fright. And saw a light. And a bearded face over the light. And she started to scream. He grinned at her for a while. Then he extinguished the match and turned round.

He went to the window. He kneeled down on his sleeping place. He shook Leo. He wanted to speak to him now, but Leo had died in the meantime.

Mrs Dvorsky was folding the green woollen blanket which she had just shaken out in front of the cellar entrance, placed it carefully over her arm, and was about to go back into the cellar when she caught sight of Ranek.

"Did you see my husband?" she called out at him.

Ranek shuffled up to her. "I thought he was at home. I'm looking for him too. When did he leave?"

"Around two. But he expected to be back soon."

"Where did he go?"

"To the barber."

"On business?"

"Not this time. He's having his hair cut."

Ranek laughed.

"The barber cuts hair too!" she said angrily. "Or doesn't he?"

"Of course," Ranek said, grinning back at her. "He doesn't only arrange black market deals. He also cuts hair. He's a fag with many talents."

"At any rate, he makes money," she said pointedly. "He's neither a thief nor a beggar and he doesn't roam the streets. You are the last person who ought to make fun of him."

The woman turned brusquely around, about to descend into the cellar, but she hardly set foot on the first step when she remembered something and she turned back.

"I saw you coming out of the house," she said cagily, "at dawn."

"I didn't know you got up so early."

"I always get up early."

"That's supposed to be healthy."

"Try your stupid jokes on someone else! Just tell me: who was the corpse you dragged out of the hallway?"

"At dawn?" He smiled at her.

"Yes, at dawn. Don't pretend you don't know anything. Who was it? Your brother?"

"No, my neighbour on the floor."

She nodded. "So . . . that one . . ."

"Yes . . . just that one."

"I could have taken a look myself," she said slowly, "but I don't like seeing something like that. Did you at least inherit something?"

"There wasn't anything left to inherit."

The woman laughed derisively. Then she left.

Ranek followed her into the cellar. There was no one there besides the baby, who was asleep. "Can I wait for your husband here?"

"It's all right with me. What do you want from him now?"

"It's nothing important," he said hesitantly. He pointed to the potato sack under the stove. "Not long ago I acted as middleman for him and bought that sack . . . at the bazaar . . . he must have told you . . . an unusual bargain." He continued hurriedly, "He promised me the peels. He said, 'My wife will save them for you.'"

"Why do you want the peels?"

Ranek smiled. She's too well off, he thought; she can't even remember what you do with peels. "Deborah will wash them," he said, "and make a good broth out of them."

The woman nodded. Then she said curtly, "We haven't started that sack yet."

Ranek refused to be intimidated. "I know you're going to start on the sack today," he said slowly, "because your husband told me this morning that you were having potatoes for supper."

* * *

Ranek helped her prepare the fire. While she was pushing crumpled-up paper into the stove, he cut up the wood and handed

her the pieces. Once the fire was lit the woman put two large pots full of water on the stove : one for the potatoes, the other for the soup. Then she grabbed the sack, dragged it from under the stove, and moved a crate over there to sit on. Ranek sat down across from her on the old travelling chest. Slowly he rolled himself a cigarette. "Do you want one too?"

"No. I don't smoke. I'd just like to know what's keeping my husband," she said, spitting angrily on the cellar floor and rubbing the wet spot with her foot.

"He's bound to be back soon," Ranek said, soothing her. "Sometimes you have to wait at the barber's."

"I hope he doesn't ask for a shave too," the woman said. "He's been getting more and more expensive in his tastes lately."

She stood up once more, poked around in the fire, and came back.

"Why did you lie to me before?" she asked suddenly.

"You mean . . . about the potato peels? That was no lie."

The woman shook her head. "That's not what I mean . . . I mean something else . . . that . . . that business with the corpse early this morning. That wasn't your neighbour. That was your brother, right?"

"That was my neighbour," Ranek said harshly. "You know yourself that my brother recovered. Anyway, what makes you ask that question?"

"Because he still can't walk," the woman said. She added maliciously, "He's well again but he still can't walk, eh? Still lies under the stairs as if he was half dead . . ."

"That's right. He's still lying under the stairs."

The woman laughed softly. "We were in your hallway yesterday . . . my husband and I . . . we took a look at him. . . . My husband said, 'A few days at most, then it'll be all over with him.' "

Damned viper, Ranek thought. Want to make me lose my appetite for the potato peels do you?

"So . . . that's what he said?"

The woman nodded. "You don't seriously believe that your brother is going to live just because he has survived his typhus

crisis? Some people only die afterwards, especially cases like your brother who are completely exhausted." She tugged at the string with which the sack was tied together, but still didn't open it. She took another look at the fire and gave a satisfied nod because it was burning well.

"Deborah is nursing him with love," she said then, "but you know, Ranek, no one who's that close to death has been put back on his feet by love alone. After you've had typhus you have to eat... the right diet... you understand... and neither you nor Deborah can provide him with that." She now smiled sympathetically. "How are you going to do it? How is he going to regain his strength? By eating garbage... and a few spoonfuls of soup made from potato peels... every so often... once a day... and sometimes not even that... sometimes only every two days? No, Ranek. That's impossible. I know that. And you know it too. Poor bastards like your brother don't get back on their feet. All they become is weaker, Ranek... from day to day, weaker and weaker... and then they die. Yes, Ranek. Then they usually die from exhaustion. As they say: incapable of recuperating, that's it!"

The woman sighed deeply. "Sorry to have to say that to you, but believe me, your brother is a certain candidate for the big cart."

Though she was only mocking him, her words contained a cruel logic. Suddenly Ranek knew she was right. And he realized at the same moment that it had been Deborah's unshakable faith and nothing else that had helped him over all his doubts about Fred's recovering completely.

"If there's still a God, he must be a big bluffer," the woman said. "First he lets a fellow like that fall sick... then he lets him survive the worst part so that his relatives are overjoyed... and then he suddenly lets him croak. It's scandalous."

"Damn it," Ranek said.

"What will you do once he's gone? My husband told me you want to marry Deborah? Is that true?"

"I can't remember having said anything of the sort to your husband."

The woman now pulled the crate a little away from the stove; it had become too hot for her there. Then she opened the sack, took out a handful of potatoes, dropped them into her lap, and reached for the kitchen knife. While peeling she did not say another word to him.

She has had enough, he thought. She's satisfied. She has emptied her poison cup.

It became comfortable in the room. All you heard was the crackling of the fire and the soft scratching of the knife peeling the potatoes. The woman's birdlike features acquired almost soft contours in the glow of the late-afternoon light that fell in through the window. It now resembled the faces of all those women who at this hour of the day sit in a corner, steeped in themselves, preparing supper for their husbands.

* * *

As soon as his wife heard Dvorsky at the entrance, she put down her work and rushed up to him. Dvorsky limped awkwardly down the cellar steps, holding with one hand onto the wall since one of his legs was too short. The woman reached him while he was still negotiating the steps and embraced him passionately. "Did you bring me a present?" she asked. ~

"Yes, a few knishes . . . direct from the cart. But they've got cold. You'll have to warm them up later on."

"Yes, fine." She stroked his face. It was not a real caress, but the sort of movement mothers will make when their children have washed themselves badly. "Got a shave, too, of course!"

"Why not if you've got the chance."

"You don't seem to know what to waste your money on next!"

"He gave me a cut rate on the haircut."

"Oh, you're just saying that, that fellow and cut rate! Did you make any other deals with him?"

"He wanted to sell me something," Dvorsky said hesitantly.

"What?"

"A woman's coat. But I couldn't make up my mind. The coat

was not in perfect shape and the price was too high."

"We need new stock," the woman whispered intensely. "Perhaps you can go back to his place later on, after supper, and try to bargain with him?"

"There was blood on the coat," Dvorsky said slowly. He added, "A bloody collar. The barber bought it from a militiaman."

"The owner was probably beaten to death," the woman said, smiling coldly. "But that doesn't matter. The blood can be easily washed out."

"Fine. If you like, I'll go back later on. How soon do we eat?"

"The potatoes will be done soon. The soup too. Can you watch it a few minutes?"

"Me?"

"Yes, you."

"Where do you want to go?"

"I have to go out." She pointed at Ranek. "But I couldn't leave that fellow alone all this time. Well, you know... and I have to go so bad."

"Go ahead, then."

* * *

"You were a long time in the cellar," Deborah said.

"Did you see me go inside?"

"Yes."

"I waited for Dvorsky. He came late."

Ranek gave her the potato peels. "That's all for today. There was nothing going on at the Bazaar."

They went upstairs together. Moishe was just coming out of the room. Ranek noticed how Moishe's face, which had looked so worried recently, was full of restless tension today. When Moishe saw how Deborah offered to shake his hand, he stopped hesitantly.

"Heads up," Deborah said, smiling encouragingly.

Moishe pressed her hand silently.

"It'll turn out well," Deborah said. "You don't have to worry as long as Dr Hofer is present."

Moishe nodded absent-mindedly. Then he quickly went downstairs.

"What's the matter with that one?" Ranek asked.

"Because of his pregnant wife," Deborah said. "She'll be operated on tonight. Didn't you know?"

"No, I didn't," Ranek said, astonished.

"Hofer examined her the other day. Her pelvis is too narrow. He calls that a malformation of the pelvis. The woman cannot give birth unless he performs a caesarean."

* * *

Moishe had done everything possible to help his wife. Hofer might have been a good gynaecologist at one time, but he could not perform the operation because he lacked the necessary instruments. So Moishe had only one choice left: to find another doctor who was better equipped than Hofer and who was prepared either to take the case himself or to offer Hofer his help. For days Moishe had run around asking everyone whether they knew of a doctor, until someone finally gave him the right tip.

It was in the coffeehouse that he got the address of a certain Dr Blum, a gynaecologist who lived in the vicinity of the Pushkinskaja.

The man who gave him the tip, one of Itzig Lupu's regular customers, told him that Blum had not enjoyed a very good reputation back in Rumania.

"A cold businessman, somebody who always exploited his patients. A real bloodsucker."

"That doesn't sound encouraging."

"You've to bargain with him." The man had made a disdainful gesture with his hand. "You'll be able to handle him all right."

"I still have a little money," Moishe had said softly, and thought of the savings his wife had brought from the brothel. A little was still left. "I still have a little money."

"There, you see. You're always better off when you can pay

for favours. You're in bad shape if you have to beg for them."

"I know that." Then Moishe had asked, "How do you know Blum so well?"

"I live next door. Besides, I still know him from the other side."

"You can't stand him?"

"No one can stand him. You won't like him either once you get to know him. But that doesn't matter. In your case—which is an emergency—you have to eliminate personal feelings."

"I haven't heard anyone mention the name Blum until now. Not even Dr Hofer, you know, the doctor I told you about before, not even he knew about him."

"Blum is almost entirely unknown as a doctor here."

"Why is that?"

"Because he doesn't practice any longer. He gave up his profession long ago. There are too many poor people in the Prokov ghetto. Besides, there's not much demand for gynaecologists around here, and then . . . well you know yourself how difficult everything is."

Then the man had told Moishe how Blum, after he had arrived at the ghetto last autumn, had sold drugs for outrageous prices and with the help of a little capital, had switched professions and become a black market operator. Dr Blum's speciality at the moment was horse meat; he was known for good quality and fair prices. On the side he also traded old clothes and occasionally gambled on the stock market.

"What's the use of my going to him in that case?"

"Why not? A doctor who's become a black marketeer is still a doctor."

"That's true," Moishe had said thoughtfully. "He is and then he isn't, either."

"You told me Dr Hofer would operate on the woman if he had the right instruments. Fine. Blum has the instruments!" The man had smiled. "Buy me another coffee and I'll tell you why."

"Fine. Even two."

"When Blum was deported he took everything from his office that could be taken along. You understand: the movable part

of his office. Simply packed everything into a big valise."

"Others did that too."

"Yes, but everything was confiscated at the checkpoint."

"Almost everything."

"Almost everything is everything!"

"Tell me the rest!"

"Blum was lucky. They didn't even open his valise. An exception. Bastards are always lucky! At that time he didn't know he would switch professions. He tried it and it worked. That was simple too."

"Yes, a simple matter, damn it!"

"Tickle Blum's nose a little," the man had laughed, "with money, of course, and just watch how fast he'll unpack his surgical workshop."

Moishe almost embraced the man, he felt so happy. "If everything you said just now is true I'll be indebted to you for life."

"No need for that at all," the man had said. "If everything works out I'll invite myself for supper at your place one of these days. The sanctuary, right? That's your address?"

Later on it turned out that the man had not lied. His statements were entirely true. Moishe remembered that he had run out into the street as if it were a matter of chasing after his wife's life.

* * *

Blum lived very handsomely. His was a place with no more than ten or fifteen people living in it. There were curtains hanging at the window and a big flowerpot stood on the window sill.

The doctor was at home. Blum was a corpulent man with horn-rimmed glasses, coarse, thinning hair, and a fat, yellow, disgruntled face. At first glance he looked as if he were suffering from jaundice.

Blum was sitting with a young woman at the edge of the platform. As soon as Moishe addressed him by name, he sent the woman away; she obeyed at once. His daughter perhaps, or his wife or simply someone who was completely dependent on him.

"Who sent you here?" Blum asked softly.

"Someone who lives next door," Moishe said.

"If you want horse meat you'll have to come back some other time. I am out at the moment."

"I don't want any horse meat," said Moishe.

He came straight to the point. Blum listened carefully. He screwed up his nearsighted eyes behind his round spectacles; occasionally his glance darted suspiciously over Moishe's tattered suit. "A good operation of course costs money," Blum said obligingly when Moishe had finished his report.

"I know that," Moishe said. "I wouldn't have come here otherwise."

Blum nodded in agreement. "Especially here in the ghetto," he said slowly.

"Of course," Moishe said, "especially here."

Blum poured himself a glass of water and smiled. He drank cautiously and then put the glass back down at the edge of the bunk. Moishe watched the doctor's fat hands and he began to feel a little nauseous, but he did not know why.

"Did Dr Hofer mention anything besides the caesarean?"

"Mention what?" Moishe asked.

"Something about a craniotomy?"

"What's that?" he inquired, "a craniotomy?"

"A destruction of the head," Blum said smiling. "The danger for a too narrow pelvis is the child's head. It's too wide and gets stuck in the pelvis. The doctor performs a small operation and shatters the child's head and the brain flows out. Then the head shrivels and can be pulled out."

"I'd prefer that to the caesarean," Moishe said.

"Why would you prefer that?"

"Because it's not the child that's at stake," Moishe said openly. He looked Blum directly in the face. "My wife is at stake. I want to save my wife. The child is unimportant."

"So . . ." Blum said.

"It isn't my child," Moishe said.

Blum was still smiling.

"Besides it's a sin nowadays to bring a child into the world," Moishe said quickly.

Blum nodded. "I'm in complete agreement with you on that point," he said. He added carefully, "Of course not as a doctor. Our job is to save lives, not to destroy them. But I agree with you as a human being. To let unconscious life grow and to let it become conscious is the greatest crime there is nowadays."

"Then you'll perform a craniotomy?"

Blum shook his head. Suddenly he no longer smiled. It was obvious he regretted what he had just said. "I can't agree to something like that as a doctor. I told you just now." His voice was slightly annoyed. "A craniotomy is performed only when it is too late to perform a caesarean and then only if there's no other way. If you recognize in time that a caesarean has to be performed, then you always perform a caesarean!"

"No need for you to get excited. It was just a question. You'll know the right thing to do."

"Well, yes." Blum smiled weakly. "Sometimes you forget that you're talking to a layman." Blum took another sip of water. "What I said about crime just now . . . why don't you forget what I said."

"Of course," Moishe said.

"I don't have the instruments for a craniotomy . . . that is . . . if there were no other way I could probably invent a way, but that would unnecessarily endanger your wife's life. And you don't want that?"

"No," Moishe said. "Not that." It doesn't matter, he thought. If Blum was against killing the child, then let it live for the time being. The main thing was that something was being done for his wife. The bastard could be got rid of afterwards, too.

Moishe remembered that Blum had asked him a few pointedly clever questions to complete his cross-examination. The doctor wanted to find out whether Moishe really had the money to pay for the operation or was only bluffing. And then came the moment for which Moishe had been waiting: Blum promised to help. "Of course, I can't make a diagnosis without first seeing the patient," Blum had said, "but if Dr Hofer's diagnosis is correct, you will have no need to worry. We'll find some way. Tell Dr Hofer that I'll come over tomorrow to discuss the various

details. The only question is : Where are we going to perform the operation. Does Hofer have any idea?"

* * *

Moishe was recalling these events while he walked uneasily up and down in the yard. But now he suddenly stopped short. This evening, he thought, in just a few hours . . .

Under the present conditions his wife would be operated on in the sanctuary. It was really all the same where the operation was performed, since the ghetto had no suitable hospital. The most sensible thing was to do it right here and not at Blum's place, because this way one avoided the trouble of transporting the woman after she had given birth.

Now Moishe turned his steps toward the latrine, glad to have found a reason for staying outside a while longer. Though he did not doubt the successful outcome of the emergency operation, still, he was extremely tense and he had found staying inside unbearable. The room had suddenly seemed to close in on him, something that had never happened to him before; the inquisitive faces that had looked so oddly distorted, the filthy floor, and the walls with the newspapers glued over the cracks produced visions of spattered blood. But what had oppressed him most of all had been the sight of his wife : the fear in her eyes, the pale face, and worst of all, the hideously swollen belly that always reminded him of the bastard child.

There was hardly anyone at the latrine. He would be able to squat down here for a short while without being disturbed. He wanted to roll himself a cigarette, but his hands trembled so violently the tobacco spilled onto the smeary board. He gave it up, pressed his knees together and stared in front of him.

His legs soon began to hurt from squatting. When the aching became worse, he got up and moved carefully up and down on the slippery board. He did not want to return to the room now under any circumstances. After a while he squatted down again

and finally succeeded in rolling himself a cigarette. He lighted it at once and began to brood again. There was one question that kept haunting him. He had been avoiding it, but now that he had accomplished what he had wanted the question cynically demanded an answer. Scores of people were dying of starvation and typhus . . . and he . . . he made such a fuss over a pregnant woman. Wasn't he just a poor, silly fool?

Moishe took a few hasty drags, then flung the cigarette into the deep pit. You're no fool, he thought, you did the right thing. Your wife is more important than thousands who croak every day; she is more important if only because she is closest to you.

He spat furiously and stared at the half-smoked cigarette floating in the muck below. What if one looked at the whole business objectively, he reflected, how does it look then? Is it right to make such a fuss over a single case?

Of course . . . even then, he brooded. Let's take those who are starving for example. What could the doctors do for them? Nothing. You don't need a doctor if you are starving. Bread, damn it, that's all you need. And what about the typhus patients? No medicines, right? And if there were medicines, he thought eagerly, they wouldn't be worth anything since there was no real cure for typhus. Every fool knew that. His mood was improving. He spat into his palms and laughed and looked at his chewed-off fingernails. One should really go to the undertaker agency, he thought with a big grin, and tell them to use an advertisement saying: Attention, all typhus and starvation candidates! Since the doctors can do nothing to help you we suggest you come to us in good time and reserve your place in line. He stared down into the cesspool again. The cigarette had disappeared. It had been swallowed up.

You're right, he thought, you're looking at it in the right way. The doctors couldn't do anything for the typhus cases and those that were starving to death. His wife's case, on the other hand, looked promising.

He laughed disdainfully. The operation—a purely local matter. So the doctors were still in the position to do this. That was the

only thing they were still able to do, the damned bunglers cut. Yes, he thought, cut!

* * *

While Moishe sat on the latrine, Deborah lit a fire in the stove, washed the potato peels, and put on water for soup. Meantime she had told Ranek everything she knew about the operation and how Moishe had managed to make something come true that everyone here had thought was impossible.

"Fantastic," Ranek said, shaking his head. "If someone else had told me and not you, I still wouldn't believe it." Now he asked, "Tell me . . . Hofer talked to you this morning. Did he want something from you?"

"Yes, he wanted something," she said, smiling.

"What is all this secrecy about?"

"I kept some thing from you," she said. "Hofer asked me to help him a little."

"You don't mean . . . during the operation."

"Yes," she said. "Dr Blum is bringing one nurse along, but Hofer said that he needs one more person . . . to hand him a few things here and there. He probably couldn't find a second nurse. Hofer said I could make myself useful."

18

Night was falling. Another senseless day was about to end. The noises in the Pushkinskaja began to die down.

Two children were coming from the direction of the Bazaar. They were walking hand in hand across the street. The boy was perhaps twelve years old, the girl eight. They were brother and sister.

"Where are we going to sleep tonight?" the girl asked.

"I know a ruin where no one will find us," the boy said.

The girl nodded. For a while they walked alongside each other in silence.

The two children were not from Rumania. They came from a Ukrainian village and had been taken to Prokov after the invasion. Their parents had been shot when the Rumanians entered the Ukraine. The girl knew nothing of what had happened. The boy did but he told her nothing. The boy had the face of a wizened man. His eyes were worldly-wise. The girl, on the other hand, was still completely innocent.

His name was Misha. But the people on the street knew him only under the name "cigarette boy". Misha had been keeping himself and his sister alive for months by smuggling and selling cigarettes. He dealt in all kinds of cigarettes: Russian ones with a long cardboard mouthpiece, which he received from Ukrainian officials who had stored them since the beginning of the war; Rumanian and German ones, which he bought from the soldiers. It was a considerable achievement to stand around the Pushkinskaja all day long, the clumsy wooden box with the valuable goods concealed under his little jacket . . . always on the watch for the police but simultaneously hawking his wares to the passers-by: "Cigarettes, cigarettes . . . Russian, Rumanian, German cigarettes, whole packets and singles . . . cigarettes, cigarettes." It was an endless song, it was a song without melody, but it had rhythm . . . the rhythm of the grey street.

The boy smoked like an adult. It could be the heavy smoking or calling out that accounted for his hoarse voice.

The girl's name was Ljuba, a name as tender as a caress, a name that suited her face perfectly.

"How many cigarettes did you sell?" Ljuba asked the boy now.

"Four singles and one packet," he said. "The rest is in the box."

"Is that enough for one loaf?"

"No, only half a loaf," the boy instructed her with a smile, "half a loaf and perhaps a few slices extra."

"I'm hungry," the girl said.

"We can't buy anything before tomorrow morning," the boy said.

"You have a slice left in your pocket," the girl said, "... from this morning ... a real thick slice ... I know you have."

"Right ... I've still got it."

"Please," she said.

"Later on," he said. "First we have to find a place where we're safe for the night."

Suddenly the boy stopped. "Listen, Ljubishka," he said, "the ruin isn't the right thing after all. I know a better place."

"Where is it?"

"In the back yard of the brothel," he said. "There's a good cellar that is protected from the wind."

"I know the cellar," she said. "It smells in the cellar."

"You're completely right," the boy said, smiling. "The people from the street use the cellar as a toilet; but you can sleep on the stairs. The steps are clean. You can believe me."

"Yes," Ljuba said.

"There are police at the brothel," the boy said, "but they're off duty and don't bother about the people on the cellar stairs. And you're pretty safe there when there are razzias."

"Why?"

"When there are razzias the whores bargain with the police. They do all sorts of things for the people who sleep on the cellar stairs. They try to protect them. Whores are good-natured, you know. They are the kindest persons I've met so far."

Ljuba looked trustingly at her big brother. How clever he is, she thought. He knows everything, absolutely everything. She did not believe in death. Death was a ghost that attacked other people. Little girls it left alone. That's what her brother had said. But she was afraid of the police. Because they were awful men with evil faces. She was afraid of these faces.

"Misha," she asked, "so the police don't go there?"

"Come along now," he said, and he drew her more rapidly through the Pushkinskaja, which had become quiet and was filled with dusk.

* * *

The light had already been turned on at the barbershop. Only two customers were there, but they had to be dealt with in a hurry. The barber was holding a haggard man's head in his hand like a big pea. The man kept fidgeting while the barber shaved his head with the dull razor. The second customer was waiting patiently. But since there was only one chair he had to sit down on the floor, where he seemed to be drowsing now.

Finally the first customer was finished. He tried to force down the price, but then paid, cursing, and left.

The man on the floor now came out of his stupor, got to his feet, and let himself drop silently into the squeaking armchair in front of the mirror. His big bald head was covered with circular wounds with pus in them.

"Please just shave the sides," he said to the barber.

At first the barber pressed the head forcibly against the headrest because it did not really fit it. He was obviously going to a great deal of trouble. Then he touched one of the wounds by mistake and let go of the head.

"Where did you get those sores?"

"In the bath," the man snickered.

"No place to wash, eh?"

"Yes . . . here and there."

"Where do you live?"

"In the coffeehouse."

"Oh . . . with Itzig Lupu?"

"Yes, with him."

"You sleep on the floor, don't you?"

"Yes, under the table."

"But you're not the only one who sleeps under the table."

The man roared with laughter.

"Do the others also have sores like that?"

"Not all of them," the man said, smiling. "A few have wounds but not on their head." His face suddenly twisted into a furious grimace. "They have it on their arse! What do you ask so many questions for! It's none of your damned business."

The barber now refused to serve him. "Come back another time when your sores aren't running any more."

"Are your hands too delicate?"

"I am awfully sorry," the barber said with a trembling voice, "but hygiene—"

"Shit!" The customer leaped up furiously. He hurried toward the door with long steps. He turned around once more in the doorway. "I'll get even with you one of these days, you filthy fag."

Meantime the apprentice looked around for the broom. He had a pretty face and wavy hair like a girl's. Finally he found the broom behind a wobbly chest.

There had been so many customers in the course of the day that the floor was literally carpeted with genuinely lousy hair. There was short hair there, and long hair, blond, black, brown, red, grey, and other hues. All sorts. He now made a disdainful about-face in the corner of the shop, got a sack, and started to fill it. After a while he went to the window, pressed his face against the pane, and looked intently across to the opposite side of the street, at the brothel. His eyes stayed fixed pensively on a window that, though it had been blacked out, emitted a weak glow of blue light.

Suddenly the window became completely dark. Someone had turned off the light up there. The boy grinned. He now loaded the sack with the hairs on his back and stepped out into the twilight street. He halted by the brothel on the other side. The window was still dark. He waited a few more minutes. But the light was not turned on again. . . . They're still at it, he thought.

He was twelve years old, like his friend the cigarette boy. He had a sister too, but she was not as young as Ljuba; his sister was old; she was fourteen. His sister, who was lying in bed with a stranger in the dark room up there, had explained to him exactly how intercourse was performed, and after she had explained it to him she had added, "You see, there's nothing to it. You have to get the men to do their business as quickly as possible so you don't tire yourself out." And then she had asked him, "Isn't there something going on between you and the barber?"

And he had said, "Yes of course."

"Then you know the score."

"But that's something entirely different," he had answered.

He looked upstairs for another while, then he stepped into the brothel yard, went to the wall and flung the sackful of hairs into the river. As he turned back he heard a familiar whistle. Damn it, he thought, the cigarette boy.

Now he saw both children by the cellar: Misha and little Ljuba.

He stepped up to them. "Well, now, what are you doing here?"

"Our new home," the cigarette boy said, pointing at the stinking cellar.

"Congratulations," he said. "Did you have any trouble?"

"No. There's enough room on the stairs. The people who sleep there have no objections. They know me and Ljuba from the street."

They whispered for a while. Then he said good-bye and darted across the dimly lit yard. The barber is going to wonder where you were so long, he thought. You'll tell him: gabbed with my sister. He doesn't like that, but what else can I tell him; that's always the best excuse.

At the gate he encountered the old hunchback. He knew her well since she was one of the group that dwelled on the cellar stairs.

"Why in such a hurry?" she asked. He made no reply. He wanted to get by her. But suddenly she grabbed him.

"Can you spare a minute, young fellow?"

"No," he said. "I have to get back to the shop."

The hunchback gave him a friendly grin. "Don't you want to try it with me?"

"I didn't know that you're one of them too," the boy said hesitantly.

"You mean someone like your sister?"

The boy nodded.

"I'm not," she said. "I'm no whore. I only do that now and then."

"That's the same thing," the boy said.

"No, that's not the same thing," the hunchback said harshly.

"Do you want to or don't you?"

"No money," the boy said. "Besides I have to get back."

"Lousy excuse. You're just afraid of me."

The boy shook his head.

"Why aren't you afraid of the fag?" she complained.

The boy made no reply.

"I haven't eaten anything today," she said. "Will you give me something?" She pointed to her stomach. "Stupid boy. I can't have children any longer. I can do that as much as I want. You don't have to be afraid. Will you give me something? Are you sure you don't want to give it a try?"

The boy shook his head again. He neither felt like spending his hard-earned pocket money nor like trying anything at all. He stared at the hunchback with fear in his eyes, then he pushed her aside unexpectedly and ran off.

* * *

The barber was just changing when a man stepped into the shop. That's bound to be someone from the black market, he thought without even turning around.

He was in a good mood again. And why shouldn't he be? Business was booming. The people were streaming to him in hordes to have their hair cut—as long as they lived, of course, he thought, and when they died their shoes, dresses and gold teeth flowed into his shop. And then the middlemen came . . . generally towards evening . . . around this time.

Now he turned around. "I knew it would be one of you," he said, "but I didn't expect you to come back today."

"I thought about it some more," Dvorsky said.

"I didn't think you would trade anywhere else," the barber said, trying to flatter him.

"Because I had no choice," Dvorsky said, grinning back at him.

The barber nodded thoughtfully. He took another look at the mirror, tugged at his tie, and brushed a few invisible motes from his spotless jacket. Then he moistened his finger tips and stroked his eyebrows. The brows are too light, he thought. I should have them dyed.

"What did your wife say about your haircut?" he asked now.

"She liked it," Dvorsky answered. "She said you're a born artist."

The barber smiled decorously. "One knows one's business."

Now he stepped up to Dvorsky. "Did you bring money?"

Dvorsky nodded. "Do you still have the coat?" he asked expectantly.

"No, the coat's gone but I've got something else in the meantime."

"What?"

"Shoes," the barber whispered. "Two pairs."

"Let's see them."

"They're outside," the barber said. "Come with me!"

Both men stepped through the emergency exit that led to the back of the house. There was nothing but a blackened, rubble-covered area where a building had stood at one time. A few tin buckets lay about and a mop was slung over the remnant of a wall. The boy used this mop to wash the shop floor once a week. The barber moved a few loose bricks aside and picked up the shoes.

"Well, how do you like them?"

Dvorsky inspected the shoes with much to-do, then he bartered with the barber, paid finally, and slung the shoes over his broad shoulders.

They stepped back into the shop.

The boy was back. He sat on his bed and was combing his hair.

"Why don't you have any tenants in your place?" Dvorsky asked.

"I don't rent," the barber said boastfully, "don't need to. The boy and I sleep here, that's all."

"I'm surprised that your shop hasn't been over-run, now that so many people don't have a roof over their heads."

"Just let them try. I have my connections too."

"They're not going to ask you about your connections. They'll just smash your shop window and turn your room into first-rate sleeping quarters." Dvorsky laughed. He stroked the shoes with pleasure. Then he stepped back out in the street.

How late it is, he thought, and his eyes looked up at the wan sky. He heard the barber locking the door behind him.

* * *

The Dniester offered an idyllic picture. The water had a softer colour in the twilight, halfway between day and night, between grey and brown, oddly indistinct. The river also seemed to flow more slowly, though this was only an optical illusion. At this hour, at the end of the day, you had the feeling that the river extended into infinite space, as if it came from nowhere and flowed into nowhere, as if it consisted merely of shadows gliding in a silent dream landscape.

Two corpses were drifting comfortably down river: a man and a woman. The woman drifted somewhat ahead of the man. It looked like a flirtation: the man constantly trying to snatch the woman but without succeeding. Then the woman drifted a little to the side and grinned at the man. And the man grinned back at her. And he caught up with her; his body touched her body.

Both corpses now proceeded to float in a circle; for a while they stuck together as if they wanted to unite. Then they floated downstream, reconciled.

The dusk deepened and the wind fanned the two bodies, fanned them just as tenderly as it fanned the water, the riverbanks, and the cornfields on the Rumanian side.

* * *

Another senseless day had ended.

The children had found asylum in the brothel cellar... Dvorsky had gone home... the barber had locked up his shop; he now blew out the lamp and, clearing his throat, lay down beside the young boy.

One of the brothel windows that faced the back was thrown open and a woman flung an empty tin into the water. She saw the two corpses drifting by, cooed with laughter, and shut the

window again. Now one of the front windows was opened. A fourteen-year-old girl stuck her head out. No one left on the street, she thought, not even the hunchback, who usually tried to pick up a few late clients at this time. Where could she be? Did she find someone in the cellar? The girl giggled. She quickly wrung out a wet towel above the street . . . and then she too closed the window again.

At this moment the cardboard pane in the window of the sanctuary was pushed into place. A patrol that happened to pass by on the street cast a bored look at the lonely ruin.

"Nothing going on tonight," one policeman said to the other as they walked along the quiet street.

19

Hofer's gaze wandered restlessly through the room. How empty it is, he thought, and suddenly became aware that he'd never before seen the room like that.

It had not been easy to persuade the people to leave the room. Not even Hofer's authority had helped. Only after Moishe had promised the people something to eat had they gone outside.

The people now squatted on the stairway or downstairs in the hallway, some had gone over to Dvorsky, and others had hidden away in the bushes behind the house . . . all that for only half an hour, or perhaps forty minutes, as long as it would take to complete the operation.

Dr Blum was present—corpulent, morose; also the nurse who had worked for Blum before the war and who was now his mistress—a young, healthy thing who owed her present good looks to Blum's excellent black market transactions. Deborah was there too. Hofer had demonstrated to her what she would have to do; she would relieve the nurse later on with the supervision of the anesthetic.

A kitchen table stood on the wide strip of floor between the platform and the wall. Hofer had brought it here in good time. Now the patient was lying on top of it. Three kerosene lamps, whose presence was also due to Hofer's foresight, dangled on a rope above the table—they were a substitute for the reflector that would normally be used for such an operation.

Hofer had been particularly worried about the problem of sterilizing all the instruments. Within their primitive means they had done what they could. They had boiled the instruments and the gloves—on the stove, in separate pots. The coats and linen sheets were freshly washed, but as far as Hofer was concerned they still constituted a big question mark; the same went for the swabs and the gauze compresses. They had no sterilization drums, and so it had to work this way.

* * *

The anesthetic was insufficient.

"We'll have to wait," Blum said in an indifferent tone of voice.

Hofer nodded. He watched Blum, who was now bent over the unconscious woman. The three lamps jiggled almost imperceptibly back and forth since Blum had hit his heavy head against them a while ago. Now the glare played over his fat face, the protruding lips looked pale green... and at this moment Hofer had the odd feeling that Blum was no longer examining the breath of the woman but the teeth of an aging mare on the black market.

The nurse continued dripping ether on the mask. Deborah followed her easy movements with great attentiveness; only occasionally her eyes grazed the motionless figure on the kitchen table, to rest for a second on the part of her body which lay uncovered between the white sheets, swelling up bare and grey and formless like the bloated stomach of someone who had drowned. I'm sure everything will be all right, she thought optimistically.

Hofer was the only one who felt a gnawing restlessness. What's the matter with you? he asked himself. Are your nerves shot

already? Are you really no longer capable of taking on a little responsibility? The unceasing noises in the stairwell increased Hofer's nervousness. Somebody's coughing out there. Strange . . . he could hear it clearly . . . this damned coughing. He tried to divert his thoughts from the bothersome noises and for a moment thought back to the city hospital in which he used to work. Hofer felt how something was clenching painfully inside him. He suddenly pictured himself standing again in front of the small surgical table. He was not alone. Several figures had gathered under the artificial daylight of the reflector : Dr Lescu, Dr Mihai, Nurse Ainsora, Nurse Ruth. He could not see the face of the third nurse because she stood off to the side and was just bending over the instrument table. It was Nurse Miriam, who had been working with him for years.

He felt : security. Not only because he knew that he was competent . . . not only because he was well fed and wasn't suffering from dizzy spells and because his hands weren't trembling from exhaustion. There must have been something else. The other element must have been the surroundings themselves, probably emanated from the well-organized body of the hospital.

He thought he was hearing his own voice : "Sister Miriam . . . my rubber gloves !"

"They're still in the sterilizer, Doctor !"

"Sister Miriam . . . give me the gloves. I've another operation at seven . . . and now it is already . . ."

"Doctor . . . the gloves have to stay in the sterilizer a few more minutes."

He awoke from his thoughts. He felt Blum's gaze . . . the nurse's gaze . . . Deborah's gaze. Damn it, you have stage fright like a greenhorn . . . simply because you have to operate on a kitchen table for a change. Times have changed, so what ! You'll just have to get that through your head, you old pedant !

"The nurse is ready with the anesthetic," Blum muttered, "everything else is ready. What are you waiting for?"

"What about the catgut? Do we have enough?"

"More than enough. Or do you think I'd let you cut if we didn't have enough catgut for the sutures."

"Just a routine question," Hofer said softly, "and not unjustified under the circumstances."

Blum twisted his mouth derisively. "Even sterile catgut. Or do you want to check once more whether it is really sterile?" His fat head pointed backward to the provisional glass cylinder that stood on the platform. "Alcohol and glycerin compound. A genuine catgut receptacle. We didn't have better ones on the other side, either."

Hofer nodded. He didn't say anything. He stared with clenched lips at the rubber gloves. That's all I needed, he thought.

"A little nervous eh?" Blum grinned maliciously. "If you don't feel well you'd better let me handle the operation. You can assist me in any case."

"Nonsense. I'll do it."

"This isn't your first laparotomy, by chance?"

"The first on a kitchen table," Hofer said coldly, "if that's what you mean."

When he was ready and took the knife his sureness returned. He knew it all along. He was himself again at decisive moments. Nothing else existed now; only the strip of skin between the sheets was still there which would open up like a red vault. Hofer bent forward a little, placed the knife just below the navel—and cut.

* * *

Moishe stood outside the door all along. Now he pressed his ear closer to the crack. It was deathly quiet in the room. They've started, he thought.

A little later he heard a crowing. "The bastard!" he murmured softly to himself. He couldn't think of anything else. He listened with breathless excitement. The crowing now was coming from a different direction, as if someone had carried the child away. Now: the gentle splashing of water into the bowl; near the door by the kitchen table... the soft voices of the doctors... the scraping of their feet... the metallic sounds of instruments being

put away. . . the clatter of the rubbish pail. He would have liked to push open the door and storm inside, but he controlled himself and continued to stand there mutely.

Time passed. Meantime it had become pitch dark outside. The people in the stairwell became restless. They began to push upstairs. Moishe suddenly turned around : "No one goes inside ! Understand !"

"Why are they taking so long? The child's out?"

"Probably they're still sewing," someone else said.

Someone laughed in the dark. "She has to be sewed up, you fool."

"No one goes inside," Moishe repeated, "no one . . . until everything is over inside."

20

The woman had been carried back to her sleeping place. She was still unconscious.

The people streamed back into the room. They stumbled over each other and made a great deal of noise. Two or three of them took the kitchen table, which was still bloody, and carried it out onto the landing. Hofer didn't stop them. He knew : the table couldn't stay inside, there wasn't enough room for it. Tomorrow he'd give it back, the table and also the lamps.

At this moment the nurse placed the newborn child into Deborah's arms. Deborah first hesitated as if she were afraid to touch this tiny, fragile being. Then she accepted it. She cradled it gently for a while. When she looked up she saw Moishe step up to Hofer.

She heard Hofer say, "It's a boy."

That didn't seem to impress Moishe. All he asked was, "How's my wife?"

"She's in no danger," Hofer said.

Moishe nodded with a vacant expression. He looked round the room as though searching for something. Suddenly he saw Deborah, he flinched, stared at the child, then stepped up to her impetuously and tore the child out of her hands.

No one dared to interfere. Moishe went with the child to the door, but suddenly he halted. For a moment his fingers closed with hatred around the bastard's throat. But then they unfolded again . . . as slowly as after cramp. "I can't do it," he murmured to himself, "I just can't do it. This little monster is here now, what's there to do."

The bastard had an unmistakably ugly face. Or did it just seem so to him? Isn't every newborn baby ugly? Something seemed uncanny to him. It was unbelievable that it was really his wife who brought this tiny being into the world in the dark of the sanctuary.

Moishe took a few steps forward. He held the bastard suspiciously under the flickering light of the lamp, and he inspected the tiny countenance once again. It had a sad look on its little face, he realized, and shook his head. Or was he just imagining it? Was that really possible? But suddenly it seemed to him as though it were really the case, as if the child knew about the burden of life even now. What nonsense, he thought, somewhat startled, a baby like that can't know what's in store for it. He pressed his lips together and walked toward Deborah, who had stood nearby all along without taking her eyes off him.

"Take it," he uttered hoarsely, "but don't drop it. Please watch it carefully."

"I'll look after it," Deborah said tenderly.

Moishe nodded mechanically; suddenly he had to swallow something and quickly turned his head because his eyes had become moist and because he didn't want Deborah to see.

A little later Moishe noticed someone tugging at his sleeve from behind. He turned round. "What do you want, Ranek?" "You promised all of us some grub if your wife survived the operation.

"You'll all get some grub," Moishe replied curtly.

"When?" Ranek asked.

"I still have a sackful of carrots," Moishe said. "I'll distribute them a little later."

* * *

"We should have started earlier," Blum said.

"That was impossible, I couldn't get the kitchen table until evening," Hofer answered.

"All right, but the nurse and I could have gone back home during the day. Now it's night and we can't leave. It's too dangerous."

"You'll spend the night here, of course," Hofer said.

"That is if no one has any objections."

Hofer suddenly looked perplexed. Blum, who sensed Hofer's uncertainty, became afraid. What are we going to do if the people object? he thought. Where are we going to go then? Furtively he studied the face of the nurse, who stood next to Hofer, and he saw that she was startled too.

Deborah was still busy with the baby, which was lying in its new cradle: the washbowl in which it had just been bathed and which had been dried. Moishe had bought the bowl recently from Dvorsky. The baby kicked and squealed. A few people had gathered round the bowl and were smiling; others were standing in small groups round the room, talking. Some were still outside. It wasn't very late, but the people were going to turn in early, as they always did. Soon the platform would start to creak, and the shaking of the boards from the people rolling restlessly back and forth would wake up the young mother. She would feel the pain and the pain would elicit screams.

Blum tried to retain a distinct impression of what each person looked like, but there were so many of them that he gave it up. His gaze strayed from one face to the other in the dark hubbub, from which a single figure separated itself now: a lean, unshaven fellow with a large battered hat. The man was dressed in rags, his feet were wrapped in foot rags, the large hat sat oddly askew on his skull. Blum would not have noticed the man had he not done something that astonished him. The

man had shuffled up to the dangling kerosene lamps, opened his pocketknife, and then cut one of the lamps from the rope. At this moment he was taking the lamp over to the window and was putting it down there on the sill.

"Outrageous," Blum whispered to Hofer.

Hofer smiled.

"We only borrowed two lamps," he said. "One of the three lamps is the room's and it always stands by the window."

"I see . . ." Blum said. "That's something else."

Now he noticed that the ragged man shuffled back and halted in front of the washbasin with the baby, and then Blum flinched because he noticed that Deborah was smiling at him.

"Ranek, have you seen the baby?"

The ragged man grunted something incomprehensible, spat on the ground, and then said loudly, "A bastard."

Blum noticed how Moishe was squatting at the edge of the platform by his wife, how he raised his head slowly. "You're a bastard yourself," he hissed.

Ranek grinned broadly. "At least the real father had more in him than you."

What a hideous man, Blum thought.

Hofer had quickly stepped up to the group. Now Blum heard him say, "You've no reason to insult the man, Ranek. That's his own business and no one else's."

A few people guffawed. A man with a shaved head interjected. "Hofer's right."

Ranek said, "Shut your trap, Sigi."

"Hofer's right," the fellow with the shaved head repeated, and he added, "That's nobody's business, not yours either, Ranek. You didn't screw her."

Blum no longer listened. "Ghastly," he said to the nurse.

"Who's that Ranek?" she asked.

"I don't know. Deborah seemed to know him well, as you can see."

She nodded. "Sigmund, I'd like to get away from here."

"It's too late," Blum said. "We can't get away any more. Or do you want to get caught in the street?"

The nurse made no reply. At this moment she noticed how carefully Moishe took the child out of the basin and then lay down next to his wife. He caressed the child without interruption. "Look, Sigmund," she whispered, "he's accepted the bastard. How lucky for the woman." And she thought, How wonderful . . . how wonderful . . . and, thinking this, she almost forgot her own plight.

"Did you hear the shots?" Blum asked suddenly.

"No," she said. They both stared at the window. After a while Blum asked, "Can you hear them now?"

"Yes, I can hear them now. But that's very far away."

"Not so far at all," Blum said, "somewhere in this area."

"You're just imagining that, Sigmund." She hesitated and then added softly, "But you're right, Sigmund—it is too dangerous to go back home tonight."

She watched Blum take off his horn-rimmed glasses and clean them awkwardly with a dirty handkerchief. He's very nervous again, she thought.

"Where are we going to sleep?" she asked.

"That's what I was thinking of just now," he said haltingly. "I have no idea."

* * *

Meantime Hofer had talked to the people and succeeded in obtaining sleeping places for Blum and the nurse in exchange for a few cigarettes.

Hofer brought the two the happy news.

"One place by the window," he said to them, "one under the stove."

Blum's face blanched. "Under the stove?" he asked, frightened.

"Next to the red-haired fellow," Hofer said, smiling. "Every so often he lets someone sleep next to him."

"I won't sleep under the stove," the nurse said, her face tense with fear.

Blum said, "Of course not." It was obvious how difficult it was for him to show his better side and play the cavalier. Stuttering now, he said to the nurse, "Take the place by the window. I'll sleep under the stove. I can't expect you to do something like that."

"Thanks," the nurse said, but she paid no attention to the stammering, confused Blum. Her eyes were riveted on Hofer, whose lips were still set in a thin smile. "The place by the window isn't that bad," Hofer said to her, and nodded. "Ranek sleeps over there, Deborah's brother-in-law."

"Ranek," she murmured, "Deborah's brother-in-law."

"Didn't you know he was her brother-in-law?"

"No."

"I'll introduce you to him later on."

"That's not necessary," she murmured. "I've seen him already."

"Ranek's neighbour died last night," Hofer explained. "There's no replacement so far and Ranek is in the unusual position of having two places to himself tonight."

"By chance?"

"Yes, pure chance." Hofer cleared his throat. "If you don't want to sleep on the dead man's place you can switch with Ranek. It's all the same."

"It's all the same to me."

Hofer nodded tried to find the right word. Finally he said, "Ranek objected at first. Wanted to sleep by himself. Wanted to really stretch out for once. You don't get an opportunity like that every day, however . . . when I offered him some cigarettes he agreed."

"You're very kind," the nurse said. "Doctor Blum will give the cigarettes back to you." And she turned to Blum. "Won't you, Sigmund?"

"Of course," said Blum.

"Ranek won't bother you," Hofer said uncertainly while he took a close look at her face.

"I'd prefer to sleep next to a woman," the nurse said.

"I know," Hofer said, "but you can't be choosy, you've got

to take what you can get, and the places under the window and the stove were the only ones I could get for you and the doctor."

Hofer again smiled encouragingly at her. "It's just for one night."

"One night can be a very long night," the nurse said.

"Now, now, don't be so pessimistic." Grinning weakly, Hofer handed her his coat. "It'll work out somehow. Here, take this to cover yourself."

"Thanks," the nurse said, just as laconically as she had thanked Blum a short while ago.

* * *

The two borrowed lamps had been blown out and now dangled cold and dark on their thin ropes like two puppets that some joker had suspended from the ceiling. Only the regular lamp was still burning by the window. The people had lain down to rest . . . all of them . . . except for one figure leaning against the edge of the platform near the door, waiting indecisively: the nurse.

Dr Blum was in the process of crawling under the stove. He forced his stout body slowly under the iron frame and then slid forward on his knees, groaning all the while. Blum was glad that Red was ignoring him. Another one of these hideous creatures, Blum thought; the less you have to talk to them the better; always keep them at a certain distance, otherwise someone like that becomes too impudent.

Red was lying on his stomach and had buried his head in his arms. He wasn't asleep yet. He was just lying in wait—quietly like a fox.

Now as Blum plunked himself down next to him, Red suddenly turned around. Blum flinched.

"In your corner!" Red hissed. "Get!"

"What do you mean?" Blum stuttered. "Which corner? But I can't—" He didn't get to finish the sentence. He felt two hands closing like a vice around his throat. He gasped, tried to

defend himself, but he was paralyzed with fright. His wide-open eyes looked into an ugly, distorted face close above his own face. "Let go of me! You've gone mad!"

"You think you can get me away from my place, do you?" Red hissed.

"No," Blum stammered.

"Then get into your corner. Your place is between the two legs by the door. You've got no business here. This is my corner."

"Yes," Blum stuttered. "Excuse me. I didn't know that. Anyway, who wants to crowd you out of your place? Not me... certainly not."

Red had let go of him again. Blum crawled on trembling knees as far away as possible and forced himself between the two stove legs by the door.

"Iofer gave me three cigarettes," Red said, "so that you could sleep between the stove legs."

"Of course," Blum said anxiously.

"I often let people sleep with me here under the stove," Red said. "They all give me something if they want to sleep here. But nobody's got the nerve to come that close to me. They all stay in their corner."

"I just made a mistake," Blum said.

"Next time I'll bop you one on your fat head," Red said.

The nurse overheard everything being said under the kitchen stove. She listened to this conversation, which lasted a while longer, with mixed emotions. Then something else caught her attention; now she turned around. A fight had started on the platform. Madness, the nurse thought, that's absolutely mad; if the woman in her childbed gets hurt now...

Somebody screamed, "Those are your brats again, Seidel!"

Another voice shouted, "Quiet! Stop it! Why don't you do something, Seidel!"

"What can I do?" was the reply.

The nurse heard the mother whimper. Moishe was cursing; the baby crying. There was a beilam of voices. Now she noticed that the emaciated, unshaven person by the window... this Ranek fellow... was turning down the wick of the lamp and

blew it out. In the sudden darkness the tumult on the platform turned into chaos. The nurse staggered frightened against the door. "My God," she murmured, "my God, the mother . . ."

She perceived Hofer's voice : "Ranek ! Turn the lamp back on at once !"

She heard a hoarse laugh from the direction of the window. Hofer's voice again : "Turn on the light, immediately !"

Then the lamp was relit. Ranek sat grinning under the lamp, his big hat was all askew, an unlit butt hung from between his lips.

The nurse had opened the door in the meantime and scurried out. Carefully she groped her way to the bannister . . . and in the darkness pushed against a crouching figure. "Is that you, Deborah?"

"Yes," came the soft reply.

"I can't stand it any longer inside," the nurse said while she cowered down beside Deborah. With trembling fingers she groped for a cigarette. She put one in Deborah's hand. Deborah took it quietly and hid it between her breasts.

"Hofer told me that you sleep out here," the nurse said. She added, hesitantly, "And your husband."

"Yes, my husband too," Deborah said. "He was ill."

"Is it true that he sleeps under the stairs?"

"Yes, that's true."

The nurse smiled crookedly.

"Then there are three of us now."

"You'll go back inside," Deborah said.

"No . . . not back in there. I . . . I just can't."

"Have you spoken to Ranek?"

"No."

"Then you haven't even been to your place yet?"

"I just stood around the room all the time. I'm not tired. I don't want to sleep. I can't . . . I just can't." She lit her cigarette. Her fingers again trembled violently.

"Put it out at once," Deborah said. "There's no front door. You can look right up here from the yard."

The nurse nervously extinguished the cigarette on one of the

stairs. "Absent-mindedness," she said, "my nerves . . . they're not used to this." She uttered a forced little laugh.

"You really ought to go back inside!"

"Why? Am I disturbing you out here?"

"No. But it's dangerous out here."

"Then it must be just as dangerous for you."

Deborah smiled mutely.

"Please," the nurse said. "Let me sit here. I don't want to sleep. Just want to sit."

"The stairs aren't mine," Deborah said mockingly. "You can sit here as long as you want."

"It's fine out here," the nurse whispered, thinking of the room, the noise, the stench of the place by the window, of Ranek's face. No, you'll never lie down next to that fellow she kept saying to herself.

Now finally she put on Hofer's coat and wrapped herself into it. "Don't think I'm a prude," she said to Deborah. "I haven't been pampered, either . . . it's just . . . it's . . ." She was struggling for words. "I live in a kind of flophouse too, but it's all different. There aren't as many people. And the people are different, too. I have seen something like this only once before in my entire life . . . and that was in Lupu's coffeehouse. We slept there for a while once . . . Sigmund and I . . . right in the beginning . . . but even there it isn't as awful as it is here. I've never seen anything like this . . . not anywhere."

"Anybody who finds room can sleep here," Deborah said softly.

"It's different in our place," the nurse said. "Sigmund made sure of that. No one can come into our place if we don't want him. We can call the police right away."

"We haven't got anything to pay the police off with," Deborah said. "We don't call the police."

"That's why it's so overcrowded here," the nurse said.

Deborah smiled. "The poorest of the poor in the ghetto live here," she said then. "I wish we had another room like this."

"The woman who was operated on isn't that poor," the nurse interjected.

"She's the exception—she and a few others. They even have soap."

The nurse nodded.

"What I meant before . . . was not how overcrowded it is," she said hesitantly.

"Then I didn't understand what you meant."

"I mean . . . that people look different here."

"How do they look different?"

"Not like people any more," the nurse said.

* * *

At first the nurse's comments annoyed Deborah, but then she remembered how the nurse came looking for protection with her . . . and this realization soothed her again.

The two women discussed everyday life to pass the time. But the night confronted them like a shadow that refused to budge. After a while the nurse lapsed into monosyllabic utterances, the way people will mutter a word here and there when they are oppressed by something and when they cannot forget what makes them unhappy, though at first they tried to forget. Deborah conducted the conversation by herself now. She talked about the past and the war and also about the future. She only said what she thought : questions that seem insoluble when you are alone with yourself, and ask yourself : why? or where to?

The nurse lit a cigarette although Deborah protested.

"Just a few drags behind your back," she begged. She smoked nervously. Then she flinched. Someone called out of the darkness under the stairway, "Deborah! Deborah! Deborah!" A soft, insistent, fearful calling that faded and finally died as a whisper.

"God!" the nurse said, "was I frightened!"

"That's my husband," Deborah said. "He just wants to know whether I'm here." And Deborah leaned far over the bannister and called down, "Here I am! Here I am!" Then she stopped calling and the anxious whispering under the stairs did not begin again. And suddenly it had become quiet and the nurse felt that an inexpressible melancholy had moved into the hallway with this abrupt silence.

"He's always the same," Deborah said softly, "he is terribly afraid, he calls my name every evening . . . and sometimes also in the middle of the night . . . and he doesn't calm down until I call to him from above."

Like a child calling for its mother, the nurse thought, but she did not say what she was thinking. All she said was: "Now I understand why you keep watch over him."

Something suddenly crashed to the floor inside, and the weak glow under the door informed them of another insignificant occurrence. They heard Ranek curse, but they couldn't make out what he was saying. The baby, which had kept quiet for some time now, started its pitiful wail. A short while later everything quieted down again.

"Someone is sneaking around near the entrance," the nurse said suddenly. "Who's that?"

"The dog," Deborah said, smiling. "He always sneaks around here, sometimes he comes right into the hallway."

There were slight scraping noises in the hallway . . . a low, moving shadow. Deborah was right: it was only a dog.

She saw the shadow come to a stop in the middle of the hallway, she heard it sniff; then it started to move again and sneak to the bottom of the stairs . . . and now she heard it sniff around in the hollow underneath, where the man was lying. Shortly after the dog began to make whining noises, as if there were a corpse there.

Deborah stood up. She hastened downstairs and did not come back until she chased the dog away.

"Did you think my husband had died?" she asked reproachfully. She shook her head disapprovingly. "He's sleeping, that's all. You can believe me."

* * *

There had been no wind all evening, but now you could hear the fence boards outside beginning to sway and creak. After a while they could hear the voices under the stairs again . . . strange, half-finished sentences . . . an odd jumble of words.

"He woke up again," the nurse said.

"No, he's talking in his sleep," Deborah said. "He always does when he gets cold at night."

"Perhaps you should put him somewhere else . . . not down there with that draught."

"He's lying on a sack," Deborah said, "and half of it is wrapped around him."

"Couldn't you bring him into the room?"

"No."

"Why?"

"The people are against it. There's nothing one can do about that."

"I understand."

"Perhaps later on when he can walk again . . . when the people will have forgotten that he was sick."

"Do you think they'll forget?"

"Yes," Deborah said.

The wind had increased. Blasts of cold air tore into the hallway and shook the bannister. The roof was creaking. The two women sat huddled close together. Silently they stared out into the night.

Later on there were noises on the street. Noises different from those the wind makes; it was the familiar noise that freezes the blood in their veins. "Beaters," the nurse whispered. That was the only word that crossed her lips while she clung to Deborah. She could feel Deborah's hands—small, thin, but determined—hands you could entrust yourself to.

"What are we going to do?" she whispered.

Deborah did not reply. She sat quietly, motionless.

The police were looking for people in the ditches; one could tell from the flashlight beams that darted along the sides of the street. A little later they could see the tiny points of light farther away by the old railway station.

"We're sitting in a trap here," the nurse hissed. "Isn't there some place to hide at the back of the house?"

"That's even more dangerous."

"But we can't just sit here and wait?"

"Go back into the room," Deborah said.

"Are you coming too?"

"No. I'm staying."

The nurse was still hesitating. She looked out onto the street. In a short time the police returned from the railway station. They regrouped in front of the fence. A beam of light illumined the latrine, was extinguished again. Then she suddenly saw dark figures run across the yard; they didn't stop at the entrance . . . they ran past and disappeared at the back of the house . . . in the bushes. It became quiet again . . . and then someone screeched, the way an animal screeches when it panics. She was shocked to see Deborah run downstairs. "Come back !" she called after her. "Do come back ! Your husband hasn't called you !" But she knew how useless it was to have said anything.

Then she went into the room.

* * *

While she groped her way in the dark, her feet became entangled in a man's legs. She received a kick and fell down.

She had fallen backward against the stove. She didn't dare move, afraid that the man she stepped on would kick her again. She held her breath. Nothing happened.

It was now as quiet in the room as it had been in the hallway before the police came. She didn't know whether the people were asleep or whether the scream in the bushes awakened them and they were only lying low to listen for other noises that might inform them about the imminent danger. She simply kept lying where she fell. Finally, when she decided to get up, she noticed that her shoes were missing. Someone must have slipped them off her feet without her noticing.

She shook Blum, who was still awake. He now crawled out from under the stove.

"What's the matter?" he asked, confused.

"My shoes," she gasped. "Someone stole them !"

Blum whispered into her ear. "The red-haired fellow has taken the shoes. I saw it. He has them under his jacket."

"Help me," she whispered back.

"I don't want to start anything with him now," Blum hissed, "otherwise he won't let me back on my place. I'll take care of it tomorrow morning."

Blum crawled back under the stove. But he returned right away. "Is there something going on outside?" he asked anxiously.

"Yes . . . there is," she whispered.

"Are they here?"

"In the bushes," she whispered.

"Don't go back out."

"No. Not again."

She felt the cowering figure reach for her hands.

"What is the matter with you, Sigmund?"

"Nothing," he said, "nothing at all."

She gently stroked his face. "Where are your glasses?" she asked, startled.

"He took them, too," Blum whispered. "Hofer will take care of that tomorrow morning."

"What a bunch of beasts," she said.

"Be quiet," he whispered, "not so loud . . ."

"What if he doesn't give them back? What will you do without glasses?"

"I have an extra pair. At home."

"And my shoes?"

"Oh, stop it. Hofer'll—"

The baby started to cry again.

"What a time for the bastard to start to bawl," someone said.

"Quick. Stuff his mouth."

"He'll choke to death."

"Then let him choke!"

"All right, I'll do it, he won't choke." All you could hear then were the little legs kicking about, and then that sound ceased too.

Now the door was opened. Deborah stood on the threshold.

"Deborah!" someone called out. "Are they gone?"

"They are gone," Deborah said loudly.

A match was lit. The lamp by the window lit up. People suddenly started jabbering away as if they had been wound up.

"Do you want to go out again?" Deborah asked.

"Have the police really left?"

"Yes, gone."

"And what if they come back?"

"No one can guarantee that."

"I'll stay inside," the nurse said softly.

"That's the best thing too," Deborah said, smiling, and she thought, She's still numb with fear. You won't be able to get her to come out again.

"Good night," the nurse whispered.

"Good night," Deborah said gently.

She watched the nurse as she groped her way to the window. She hadn't considered before how unpleasant it could be for the nurse to have to lie next to Ranek. She realized this only now. Should she warn her? Worry her even more? No, she thought, there's no sense to it, she's worried enough as it is. And after all, the nurse isn't a child any more. She'll be able to take care of herself.

21

Ranek moved over without saying anything to her. He did not say anything either after she had spread Hofer's coat out on the floor and wrapped herself up in it. She knew at once that he hated her. You could sense that. It was a wordless hatred. She thought, It is not your fault that he is starving . . . and anyway what right does he have to fling his hunger into your face? So you are better off than he is! That's your business, not his. The thoughts rushed through her mind. Why does he stare at you out of his embittered eyes as if he wants to undress you? And why doesn't he say something? . . . Not a single word? And what the devil does he have in his right hand: a thing that looks like a carrot?

She remembered that Moishe distributed carrots among the

people, but this thought did not soothe her at all. Why isn't Ranek eating his carrot? Does he want to to intimidate her? What does he want from her? He isn't planning to—Suddenly she felt as if an ice-cold hand were reaching for her heart, and she turned around so as not to have to look at this long, hard thing in his hand.

The cripple to her left seemed not to have noticed her presence. He was lying stiffly on his back and was staring melancholically at the ceiling. Every so often he scratched his wooden leg as if he really had an itch there. Once again she turned her head to the right to make sure the carrot was not imaginary. But at that moment Ranek reached over to the window sill and quickly turned off the lamp.

Again she felt like jumping up, running out, and it took great self-control not to give in to this impulse. She kept quiet and waited. Ranek still didn't say anything, but she knew that he was staring at her in the dark. She reached to the side to push his jacket a little farther away, but she had hardly touched the jacket when she pulled back, nauseated—the jacket was full of hairs. She was about to wipe her hand on the wall, when she was hit on her knee.

It was the wooden leg. The cripple had turned around and the wooden leg slithered diagonally across her thigh and came to rest there.

She didn't dare push it away. Don't get into a fight, don't get into a fight, she thought; that would be the stupidest thing you could do now. Don't get the man excited. Don't push away the leg. He'll take it away by himself.

Now Ranek addressed his first words to her. "Why do you let him get away with that?"

So he has noticed, dark as it is.

Ranek repeated, "Why do you let him get away with that?"

"He didn't do it on purpose," she said fearfully.

Now Ranek sat up and pushed the wooden leg off her thigh.

"Thanks," she said with a trembling voice.

"He never takes off that leg," Ranek said. "He's afraid someone will steal it."

"Who's going to steal a wooden leg?" she said, and tried to make her voice sound as natural as possible.

"You're wrong," he said. "We're often hard up for dry wood when we want to light the stove."

Now she laughed, but it was a false laugh.

Suddenly he asked, "Why are you so scared of me?"

"I'm not scared," she lied. "Why should I be scared?"

"Perhaps because you noticed the carrot?" he said mockingly. "Don't you think I knew what you were thinking?"

"What am I supposed to have thought?"

"That I'm impotent," he said, and his voice was no longer playful now. The voice was harsh and hate-filled. "That I'm impotent," he repeated, "and that I wanted to do it with the carrot. That's what you thought, wasn't it?"

She didn't answer.

"I had someone like you once who was just as well fed as you," he said insistently; "at least she was well fed at first when she came here. A man goes crazy here when he sees a well-fed woman. Because it's so rare. I mean a woman who isn't a skeleton, who still has some meat left on her bones." And his voice trembled with hatred. "Who still looks like a human being. Not like me. Not like most of us. You understand? Like a human being?" He clicked his tongue and added softly, "Do you want to hear what I did with her?"

"No," she said, shuddering, "I don't want to know." It occurred to her that he might only be exaggerating and that what he was saying wasn't even half true. Perhaps he wants to blackmail you? That's what it must be. Nothing else. He wants something. Money? But you don't have any money with you.

"Do you want money from me?" she whispered. "That's what you want, isn't it? Just money? Will you let me sleep then? Will you promise me that you'll let me rest if I give you something?" She added quickly, "I can understand that. I can understand that, really."

"What can you understand?" he asked hoarsely.

"That it's not the money you're after," she said carefully. "You

just want to buy something to eat, don't you? Tomorrow . . . you want to tomorrow—"

"You talk too much," he interrupted her angrily. "How much do you have with you?"

Oh my God, she thought. "None at all," she said softly. "I'm not so stupid as to bring money to this place. Or do you think I'm that stupid?"

"You're having your fun with me. I'll pay you back for that."

"No, I'm not," she said quickly. "I . . . I'll give you something instead of money . . . something you can sell."

"What?" he asked.

She reflected. What . . . what can I give him?

"You came barefoot to the window," he said. "I thought immediately that somebody had stolen your shoes. Nobody's so careless as to leave good shoes around during the night."

"Stolen," she said. "That's true."

He broke out into hysterical guffaws, a madman's laugh, it seemed to her. She had already calmed down somewhat but his laughter distracted her completely. She suddenly felt she was sweating. And she knew: she was afraid again. Give him what he wants. Just so that he'll leave you in peace!

"If you give me your word of honour that—"

"I do," the hoarse voice said.

"You can have my underclothes," she said, trembling. "You can exchange them for bread, as far as I'm concerned. You only have to leave me the dress. I can't go home naked tomorrow."

"You can keep your dress."

First she gave him her stockings. Then her brassière. She undressed completely and gave him the rest of her underclothes. Then she put the dress back on.

* * *

The nurse yawned and moved her aching limbs and sat up. She was glad the night was over.

The inhabitants were not awake yet. Ranek, too, was still asleep, his head on his hat, the light did not seem to trouble him; he slept as soundly as if he had taken pills.

She looked for her underclothes. There was no trace of them. Perhaps he has hidden everything under the jacket on which he was sleeping now. You'll tell Hofer everything. Hofer is sure to talk Ranek into giving you back at least some of your things. And if not, she thought, then Blum will have to buy you new things. But you don't get lingerie like that, not even on the black market. Now she remembered her shoes and Blum's glasses. What a mess, she thought. What if Hofer can't handle the redheaded fellow?

She observed Ranek for a while. She was no longer afraid of him. Now, in daylight, he no longer looked vicious. What she saw was a half-famished, pitiful sleeping man.

She carefully studied his face. He didn't look so old as long as his eyes were closed, she thought. Those bitter eyes were the worst part. True, he had two big creases that extended far across his temples and long, suffering folds between nose and mouth, but many young people had that nowadays—one became used to that. She noticed that his mouth did not look as brutal when he was asleep as it looked last night. Her gaze rested on his thinning hair, the dirty, unwashed scalp underneath, and then she turned her head away, nauseated. And she got up and stepped to the window. She pushed the cardboard pane aside. She looked into the yard. She saw the crooked telephone pole behind the broken fence, and farther on she saw the fallow land around the railway station, and it seemed to her that she was gazing on the atrophied landscape of a distant planet.

Now she opened both sides of the window and inhaled the fresh air; she breathed deeply and tried to keep her thoughts focused on Blum, who should be getting up soon, and their going away together and never coming back here.

She pulled a comb and a little mirror out of the pocket of her dress. She proceeded to comb her thick, beautiful hair; she looked with fascination into the mirror. And a happy, liberated feeling overcame her as she realized that she was still young.

Part Three

I

Fred had died. The hollow under the stairway made a profoundly desolate impression. People had become so used to seeing him lie there—as if he had been a living embodiment of the missing step. Not even the sack on which he used to lie was left there now. The hole had again become the abode of the rats who used to scurry about there at one time.

* * *

The air was so heavy in the room tonight that you could hardly breathe. The air seemed to stand still.

Ranek had awakened with a start. He pulled up one knee, scrambled to his feet, and cowered down by the window.

"What's the matter with you?" said his neighbour to the left, the man with the wooden leg. "What's the matter with you?" he whispered again. "Why did you scream like that in your sleep?"

"I didn't scream," Ranek said.

"You did," the man said. "You screamed." He grunted something or other. Then he lifted his wooden leg with both hands, turned to the other side, and started to snore again.

Ranek looked for tobacco and a piece of newspaper. He rolled himself a cigarette, but he was hardly aware of what he was doing.

* * *

Fred had died in the middle of the night.

Deborah was the first to notice and she came upstairs immediately and awakened Ranek. Ranek followed her with the lamp out into the hallway and set the lamp down on the ground, close to Fred's head, so that the light would shine on his face.

Ranek did not look long at his brother, but during the few seconds that he did time seemed to have frozen. That's not him, he thought, that can't be him! And suddenly it seemed as if he had never seen a dead person's face in his entire life. He felt something beginning to stir inside him, something he didn't know still existed; he felt an odd burning sensation and simultaneously a dull ache, and then he noticed how something sour came up out of his stomach and subsided again, as if it wasn't permitted to come out. Don't go soft now, he thought with clenched teeth; there's enough time for that later on. You have to do something now! And you have to do something fast.

"I have to do it now," he said hoarsely to Deborah. "Because it'll be too late tomorrow morning." And because she couldn't say a word, he continued, "I have to do it. You know that yourself. I don't want to have to fight them. I have to do it before they notice." His voice sounded hollow and oddly unfamiliar in the night. "The gold tooth means life, Deborah. A few weeks of life for us. Try to understand." He grinned at her despairingly, and he looked in her face and it seemed to him as if he had not said what he had just said. Then he turned away.

Ranek knew it wouldn't be easy to pull Fred's tooth; his jaws were as stiff as a piece of old wood and the lips were pressed together so tightly it seemed his last thoughts had centred on the realization that he would be robbed. For a fleeting moment Ranek considered going to Dvorsky to borrow the pliers . . . the same pliers that Dvorsky had used that time on the Rumanian shore . . . but he remembered that Dvorsky had only borrowed the pliers himself and had long since returned them. Ranek did not spend much time reflecting. He went into the yard and got the hammer.

Deborah had not interfered at first. She watched silently as he checked the corpse's mouth and jaw, but when he came back from the yard and started to tear the obstinate lips apart she

held onto his arm and cried and tried to stop the desecration. For a while he tried to fight her off, until she suddenly let go of his arm and sank down to the ground beside him. He had not hit her; he had only kept her away from him, pushing her back; he didn't understand why she should become unconscious like that.

Left undisturbed now, he continued with his work. Fred's lips had burst under his blows and gradually turned into a bloody pulp. When he had finally extracted the tooth and had got to his feet, sweating from the work, he noticed that someone besides Deborah was in the hallway, a second witness, whom he had not noticed in his excitement; the old Levy woman. She was sitting on the topmost step and her unclear eyes looked down on the bloody spectacle that took place in the circle of light shed by the kerosene lamp.

Dvorsky had blabbed not long ago and told the old woman who had stolen her son's shoes. She detested Ranek now and frequently cursed him or spat on him when he was near.

Ranek had cornered Dvorsky one day because of her. "Why'd you tell her? You promised me you'd shut up!"

"Absent-mindedness," Dvorsky had said. "Why worry about that old washerwoman."

"She considered me somebody decent."

All Dvorsky had done was to grin.

"I'd told her all sorts of things," Ranek had said then. "I turned everything around so it looked as if her son owed me something, not the other way round. She believed every word . . . and I set her mind completely at rest by giving her a piece of the bread that you gave me for the shoes—bread that was legally hers anyway."

Dvorsky had replied, "You know, that'll be a good lesson to the old woman. She'll no longer think people are selfless from now on. She'll become more careful."

The old woman sat silently on the step, like an owl. Only when Ranek tossed the hammer to one side and knelt down at Deborah's side did the old woman slink back into the room, to fetch Red. She returned with him shortly. Ranek could hear the two talking upstairs on the landing.

"You're too late," the old woman mocked him. "Ranek's got the tooth."

"Shit," Red said, "god-damned shit."

"Just look what that fellow did to his own brother," the old woman said. "Do you see the hammer down there with the blood on it? He took the hammer and . . ."

* * *

Next morning Ranek took the tooth over to Dvorsky.

"Nice of you to come directly to me with it," Dvorsky said. "I'm only a little surprised since you say I pay so little."

"Don't open your mouth so much. I came to you. That's all."

"The tooth burns a hole in your pocket, eh?"

"Burns, yes," Ranek said.

Dvorsky nodded. "By the way, my commiseration." Dvorsky grinned. "Just should have watched better," and he pointed to the broken tooth; "there's not much left of it."

"Because I hit too hard with the hammer," Ranek said. "His lips were pressed together so tight. I looked for the broken-off piece in the hallway, but I couldn't find it."

"Too bad." Dvorsky twitched his shoulders sympathetically.

"What'll you give me for it?"

"A piece of cheese," Dvorsky said, smiling, "because it's you."

"Don't talk such nonsense. You know I need flour."

"No nonsense," Dvorsky said. "It's good cheese. Take it. It's a special kind, you don't get it every day on the black market." Dvorsky smiled mysteriously. "Roquefort! Now what do you say? Directly from Bucharest. A Rumanian officer brought it in, gave it to a whore in the brothel; she sold it to the barber and the barber is an old acquaintance of mine. Something like that goes from hand to hand."

"I need flour," Ranek said.

"Don't be a fathead. Roquefort is damned expensive and I'll give you a big piece. You'll get at least a two weeks' supply of corn flour for that."

"That's not much. I was counting on more."

"It's plenty for a broken tooth," Dvorsky said curtly.

Ranek thought. "What am I going to do with cheese?" he asked hesitantly. "You have nothing but trouble running round with it until you find someone who wants it. Why don't you give me flour right away? Why such a run-around?"

"Don't have any in the house at the moment. Just enough for ourselves."

"No potatoes, either? Or bread?"

"No. Not unless you can wait until I buy a new supply."

Ranek shook his head. He wanted to be rid of the tooth, the tooth and the memory of what had happened. "All right," he said, "agreed."

* * *

Ranek carried the cheese around in his pocket for a few days because he couldn't strike a satisfactory bargain with the dealers at the Bazaar. After some time his jacket began to smell so badly of cheese that he became afraid—the people in the sanctuary eyed him as if he were a walking grocery store. Some even followed him to the latrine. The man with the wooden leg kept warning him, "You can't run round like that. You're getting everyone excited. They'll attack you. Watch out!"

Because he was so afraid the cheese would be stolen he kept his hand in the same pocket. Soon the hand too began to smell of cheese.

Ranek retained only a vague recollection of what cheese actually tasted like. The temptation to bite into the cheese was overpowering. He knew that this was a luxury he could not afford. One day, however, he could no longer stand it; he ate half the cheese; the rest he put back in his pocket to give to Deborah, who had a right to her share.

* * *

When they came to get Fred, the people stood near the fence and gabbed. Many of them still remembered the little blond fellow, Seidel's brother, who had put his hand on Levy's face on the

cart . . . and they were waiting for something of the same order to amuse them again this time.

Well, the procession took a slightly different course this time. Levy and the little blond fellow were given, as they say, special treatment; Fred wasn't as lucky, because neither Ranek nor Deborah could afford corpse bearers, and that was why Fred had to spend a few more days in the hallway, for better or for worse, and wait for the city burial cart.

When the big cart finally arrived, the crowd at the fence began jeering. Ranek and Sigi gasped as they dragged Fred across the yard. The people waved to them and urged them to hurry—the cart never stopped for long; in that respect it was like a tram. Ranek and Sigi managed to drag the body as far as the fence; there their strength gave out. The crowd went into action. Numerous arms took hold of Fred, lifted him up, and threw him on the street.

The cart was filled to the edges with stiff. Farther on, on the other side of the street, lay five more corpses, people from the old railway station who had been pushed through the barbed wire at night and rolled down the embankment onto the street. These five corpses were taken care of first. Then it was Fred's turn; he was placed on the very top of the stack. The driver was snapping his whip impatiently because it was taking so long; the workmen, who had to be clever when they stacked the corpses so that they would not roll off again, cursed angrily and cursed the driver and cursed the corpses, and the small, overworked panje horse snorted and pulled with trembling flanks at the shafts.

The crowd at the fence was cracking dirty jokes as usual. Ranek noticed a man from Dvorsky's cellar : a man with the face of a bulldog who stood close to him again . . . just as he had when Levy and the blond-haired fellow had been taken away.

The man rolled himself a cigarette and asked Ranek for a light . . . he behaved exactly as he had the last time . . . and he murmured his name again as if this was the first time they met. "Permit me, my name is Sami. Is that fellow up there your brother?"

Ranek did not answer.

"Knew immediately it was your brother," the man said with animation, "looks a lot like you if his mouth weren't bashed in like that." When the cart started to move and the corpses began swaying and slipping all over each other, he said, smiling, "Besides, your brother has quite a view from up there. Pity the poor devils on the bottom."

"Why don't you shut your trap!" Ranek flared up. He would have liked to spit in his face, but he remembered that Deborah was in the crowd, and he controlled himself.

"Don't misunderstand me," the man said, taken aback. "I just mean that even among the dead some are better off than others. Just as among the living."

Ranek's eyes kept searching for Deborah. Finally he found her. She stood a little to the side. No one paid her any attention. Her face had an oddly abstracted quality about it. She did not seem to see anyone, neither the crowd nor the cart as it swayed into the distance with the dead. It seemed as if the entire procession no longer concerned her. She stood there very straight, staring into empty space, moving her lips all the while. At first Ranek thought she had lost her mind, but then he noticed that she was only praying.

* * *

Deborah had been avoiding him since the incident in the hallway. When he tried to talk to her she would simply turn her head or walk out of the room. Ranek was convinced that she was not reproaching him for anything. After all, Fred had been dead and had no use for his tooth, and anybody who had been in his shoes would have done the same thing. It's not because you *did* it, he told himself; she just can't forget *how* you did it. She shouldn't have seen it happen. It was too much for her.

One day he followed her along the street. He knew that she had been running around the ghetto all day looking for leftovers; he knew that she was hungry, exhausted, and ready to collapse. She was running like a hunted, wounded animal, stag-

gering, using her last strength to walk just a little faster. Ranek quickly caught up with her. He grabbed her arm. "What is it with you?" he spluttered. "Can't you forget?" He took the remaining part of the cheese out of his pocket. "Here! That's your share of the tooth. I saved it specially for you." He was about to put the cheese into her hand, but she tore herself from him with an expression of horror; the cheese fell on the street. Cursing, he bent down and picked it up.

* * *

Not very long ago Moishe's wife had left the sanctuary and had not returned. No one knew what had happened to her. The people kidded and needled Moishe; they told him that his wife had gone back to the brothel and that he should go and look for her there. That was nonsense, of course. The woman had been nabbed on the street and taken away; that was the only possible explanation.

Deborah now took care of the baby without losing any words over it. Why's she doing that? Ranek asked himself. He didn't understand her, but he noticed that she had become calmer and no longer seemed to suffer as much since she had the baby to take care of.

One evening she was bathing it. Ranek watched her out of the corner of his eyes. She scrubbed the baby, which bawled as loudly as it could—deafeningly. Then she dried it, wrapped it in diapers and cradled it until it fell asleep. As always when she cradled the child the same sequence occurred, which caused Ranek to become violently jealous. She murmured, "Pst . . . pst, be quiet baby, Mamma's coming . . . Mamma's coming." And then she would sing some Rumanian lullaby in a soft, tender, patient voice: "*Heida lula, heida lula*, father's in the field, he's picking corn . . . corn for the child . . . for the child."

He knew that she no longer thought of Fred during such moments of devotion. Her head was bent deep down over the baby; her simple knot of hair had become untied and her hair fell down over her shoulders in long dark plaits. Just as long ago

when she had become dreamy playing the piano or during the Sabbath prayer, always when she was completely absorbed in something and thought no one was watching her, he noticed again how soulful her face was. It was sad but radiant at the same time.

* * *

Ranek could still remember the conversation he had had a few days ago with Sigi, which had been very unpleasant for him and almost resulted in a quarrel.

"It's pretty obvious that you can't stand the little bastard," Sigi had said. "When Deborah washes it your eyes glare as if you'd like to kill it."

"Don't talk such rubbish."

"You're jealous. You'd like her to wash you, eh?"

"Shut your filthy trap."

But Sigi had persisted. "All joking aside. I know you need her. A man is worth twice as much if he has a woman, even if he can't do it to her any more. But you need a woman anyway, don't you? None of us can stand being alone forever." Sigi cleared his throat and did not know how to go on.

* * *

Ranek was still squatting under the window and smoking; he had been chain-smoking. He felt he would go mad, he simply couldn't fall asleep.

He took one more drag from the damp cigarette, then he slowly rubbed it to shreds and extinguished the sparks that had fallen on the floor. Suddenly he stood up. He stood in the dark without moving and looked in the direction where he thought Deborah was.

She had not been sleeping in the hallway for some time now. She was lying over there by the long wall, right under the board with the empty clothes hooks. Now he went carefully over to her. This was not the first night that he had approached the place where she was sleeping. But he did not touch her. Now, too,

he cowered down beside her. She was sleeping deeply. She was breathing as softly as a child. The night was not as disconsolate near her. If you were close to her you had the feeling that the many unfamiliar people were no longer here, that the putrid air in the room was suddenly clean. Deborah gave off something clean and that was good for you.

Later on he shuffled back to the window. The window was open. He leaned far out and filled his lungs with air. After a while he noticed the figure of a man approaching quietly. The man came up to him and stopped.

"What's the matter, Sigi? Can't you sleep either?"

"No."

"Damn it."

"Funny, and it's so quiet outside. The police no longer bother with us. Sometimes I think the authorities have forgotten all about the sanctuary."

"They haven't forgotten us."

"But then why . . . ?"

"They want us to expire in peace here."

"I think you're right."

"I prefer it this way," Ranek said, smiling.

Sigi nodded. Suddenly he asked, "Do you want to go for a walk in the bushes? Perhaps we'll find a corpse there?"

"No . . . not tonight."

"But we went yesterday . . . and we found something. Perhaps we'll be lucky again?"

"I don't feel like it," Ranek said.

"Scared shitless, are you?"

"Let me be. Why don't you lie down again."

Sigi grunted something, then he yawned and shuffled back to his place.

Ranek thought, The fellow's right. You're scared. But it had been uncanny last night. . . . And with a shudder he recollected how he and Sigi had run around last night: there was a full moon and the silvery light had nestled in the twigs of the bushes; there was creaking and rustling everywhere and their own two shadows pursued them like guards. After a while Ranek

wanted to turn back, but Sigi had insisted. "We're bound to find something . . . we'll find something . . . somebody out here must have croaked . . . we'll find something."

And then they really did find what they were looking for: a completely naked woman. Her corpse was propped up against a bush.

"Robbed clean already," Ranek said to Sigi, "too late again."

Sigi nodded. Then he flinched. "Look, there! What's that?"

Ranek had noticed it as well, something lying at the side of the path. They both ran towards it.

"A handbag," Sigi exclaimed, dumbfounded.

Ranek laughed. "The fellow that stole the dress must have been in an awful hurry if he overlooked the handbag."

They opened the bag. There was a compact and a comb inside. The comb had a few teeth missing. That was all. Absolutely all.

They quarrelled for a while because they could not agree on who was to get what. Finally Sigi opted for the handbag; it was made of cloth and wasn't worth much. Ranek took the compact and the comb.

* * *

A chicken was cackling somewhere. The cackling woke up Moishe. Well now, he thought, damn it, it's still the middle of the night and the chickens are cackling? He sat up sleepily. Anyhow, since when are there chickens around? He stared at the open black square of the window where the sky had cut out a human silhouette. That's Ranek, he thought.

He called out softly, "Ranek!"

Ranek flinched. Then he shuffled slowly to Moishe's place. "What is it, Moishe?"

"Can't you hear it?"

"That comes from the yard," Ranek whispered. "Dvorsky has some chickens again. He slaughters them at night at the latrine so that the people in his cellar don't see them."

"He's well off, isn't he?"

"He really struck it rich here in the ghetto. Eats better now than he did before the war started. Used to be a coachman, that's all."

"That's the way it is," Moishe said. "When times change the dirt floats to the top."

They listened a while longer. The cackling turned into a hysterical screech, which ceased suddenly.

Moishe lit a cigarette. He held the match up high and noticed that Ranek was holding something in his hand. "What do you have there?"

"A compact," Ranek said, "and a comb."

"Where did you get it?"

"Found it."

"Want to sell it?"

"Yes. You interested?"

"No, not me. Just asking."

"The comb isn't worth anything. I'll keep it for myself. But the compact is in good shape."

"Dvorsky will buy it from you."

"No, he won't. I already asked him."

"I'm sure you'll find someone."

"Yes."

"Let me see it."

Ranek handed him the compact. Moishe lit another match. It's cheap, he thought, in bad taste. He looked at the cover with a rococo picture: a woman with a silver wig. She was holding a little mirror in one hand and smiled affectedly.

Moishe grinned. "Pretty," he said.

"Isn't it?"

"Can I smell?"

"If you like to."

Moishe opened the cover and sniffed. "No more powder," he said, disappointed.

"If you use your imagination," Ranek said, "then you'll still be able to smell it."

"I can't smell anything," Moishe said, "nothing at all. Believe me, there isn't a hint of powder inside. The person who used to

own the compact must have washed it out. You can also use compacts for other things. I mean when you have no more powder of course . . . and . . ."

"There was a lock of hair inside," Ranek said. "I threw it away."

Moishe repeated, "The compact was washed."

Ranek took the compact out of his hand and sniffed at it again and said, "Anyway, I think I can smell powder."

Ranek shuffled back to the window. Odd fellow, Moishe thought. He lay down again. Accidentally he pushed against the baby, and it awoke and started to whimper. "Pst," Moishe said, "pst . . . pst." It was no use.

"Bastard," he cursed, "you lousy little bastard." And he thought, If it weren't for my wife I would . . . In desperation he took the baby into his arms and cradled it back and forth. He tried the lullaby: "*Heida lula, heida lula* . . ." but he had forgotten the rest of it now.

Recently Deborah asked him to leave the child with her during the night, but he objected because he did not want the child to sleep on the dirty floor. "It's all right," he said to her. "You're doing enough for the child as it is. Better leave it with me."

Now he didn't know what to do. He sighed and climbed down from the platform to call Deborah, but when he stood by her side with the child in his arms he did not have the heart to awaken her. What a firm sleeper, he thought. No wonder, after all that time in the hallway.

He directed his steps in the dark towards the kitchen stove. The necklace with the three teeth, he thought . . . Of course, why didn't you think of that in the first place? The necklace is hanging by the stovepipe next to a doll called Mia, both of them fetishes that belong to Red, but Red won't notice if you take the stuff for a few minutes for the child to play with.

Moishe lit another match and showed the doll to the child, and then he took the little fingers and pushed them against the one glass eye, but the child evidently didn't want to play with the doll—it kept pushing it away again and again, and so Moishe hung it back on the stovepipe.

Now he tried the necklace with the human teeth on it. He lit another match and dangled the necklace back and forth above the flame, saying, "Look what a pretty little necklace, what a pretty little necklace," over and over again. And now the child stretched out its little hands and reached for the teeth and stopped crying.

Moishe placed the child back on the platform. He let it play with the teeth for a while. And later, after it had fallen asleep, he sneaked back to the stove and hung the necklace next to the doll.

The old hunchbacked woman had been sitting for some hours at the back of the brothel. Her begging had not brought her much today; business always was bad at this spot because the people who came through the side entrance to relieve themselves in the brothel cellar generally were badly off themselves. There were the people walking back and forth on the sidewalk, but they pretended not to see the hunchback. Her life had been easier when she had been allowed to sit in front of the main entrance and had been able to stretch her hand out to the soldiers who usually left the brothel in a good mood and a little drunk; recently the doorman hadn't allowed her to sit there any more.

Now she looked unobtrusively at the doorman, who was leaning lazily against the door, smoking his pipe as usual. He paid no attention to her. She watched him nod sleepily to a whore who came out of the house with affected little steps.

The old woman spat; that one was meant for the doorman; of course she made sure he didn't notice. That pompous idiot, she thought angrily, and she remembered: he's also an informer,

has given a lot of people away whom he didn't care for. They're sure to string him up when the war is over. Now she grinned to herself because she pictured how the doorman would look with a rope around his neck. She started laughing softly to herself; her hunger was making her see the strangest things again. Now she could see precisely what it would be like . . . how he, the doorman, would hang from a crooked hook above the brothel entrance. Somebody had put his fat brown pipe into his frozen mouth; a note pinned on his jacket said, in red ink, an informer! Underneath a seal in a foreign language.

The hunchback shook her tin cup; it was an instinctive movement, and the loud noise brought her to again. These damned headaches, she thought, these damned headaches.

Today the city was like an oven again. It was already late in the afternoon, and although the merciless sun had long since passed its zenith, the heat had not eased. Traffic on the Pushkinskaja moved like a weary steam roller. Clouds of dust hovered in the air and made it difficult for people to breathe. The hunchback looked out of aching eyes at the people trudging senselessly back and forth. Farther up the street a number of horse-drawn carts loaded with wood came into sight, slowly trundled up to the brothel, and came creaking to a stop. The drivers shouted coarsely into the open windows. One of them started to sing, a vulgar air that broke hoarsely out of his throat. Then the sweating horses hove to again and the carts swayed on. The hunchback looked after them with dull eyes. They're driving to the sawmill, she thought . . . to the sawmill . . . to the sawmill . . . where they've built the new railway station is a sawmill too. She murmured a curse in their direction because she remembered that she needed sawdust herself, so that she would lie dry. Then she started jangling her tin cup again and staring at the indifferent faces of the passers-by and no longer thought of anything at all. For a time she could not feel her head ache, either; she was nothing but a machine jangling its tin cup, jangling and jangling and jangling.

But suddenly she started. She saw someone she knew shuffling past, a figure that tottered . . . an unshaven face . . . a hat that

was battered and was too large. The figure paid her as little heed as the other passers-by. He simply shuffled past. But that's Ranek, she thought.

Ranek was walking like a stork. He looked as if he were afraid to step firmly on the ground, as though the ground was so hot it singed his feet through his thin rags.

She noticed a long rip in his trousers running all the way from the bottom to his thighs. And she thought, That fellow's really come down in the last few months . . . his naked flesh is showing through his trousers.

Ranek drifted on with the crowd. But suddenly he stopped, as if he wanted to stave off the mass and no longer let himself float with it. Ranek came back. He was steering directly towards her. He did not greet her; he simply bent down and asked curtly, "Do you know when the doorman knocks off work?"

She shook her head.

"I have to get into the brothel," Ranek said hastily. "There's something I have to sell; I have to get inside today."

His hands stroked nervously across his face; there was a fever glow in his eyes.

Something's wrong with him too, she thought sympathetically, while her eyes quickly inspected his face.

"The doorman didn't even take a lunch break today," she said. "The bastard refuses to budge, stands guard all day in the same spot. There's nothing one can do about that. What do you have to sell?"

"That's none of your business," Ranek said.

"Perhaps I can help you?"

Ranek reflected. Then he said, "A compact. I thought the whores could use something like that."

"I don't think so. They have stuff like that. They're provided for."

She moved to the side and asked him to sit down beside her. This invitation did not seem to impress Ranek, but because his feet hurt he followed it after all.

"You rest a bit here first," she said, "and try the barber later on. He deals in all sorts of things."

"You're right," Ranek said. "That's not a bad idea." He rolled himself a cigarette.

"What kind of tobacco is that?"

"Homemade."

"From butts?"

"Not this time."

"From tobacco leaves?"

He shook his head.

"Dried grass, in other words?"

"Something like that," he said, grinning. "I'm not sure myself exactly what it is."

"Your own mixture. Let me try it."

He manufactured a second cigarette and offered it to her. But he lighted his own cigarette first.

"You're not exactly polite," the hunchback said, "but it doesn't matter; nice of you anyway to treat me to a cigarette."

They smoked, and gazed silently on the hot, dusty street. The doorman was conducting a conversation with a whore at the front entrance. He was saying, "Just a second, please. I want to go over and chase those beggars."

"But the woman sits there every day."

"But not the man," the doorman said. "If you don't watch out you'll have an army of them in no time at all."

"So why don't you let the poor people rest?" the whore laughed, and she held the doorman back by his sleeve.

* * *

"I kept looking for you," the hunchback said to Ranek, "but I couldn't find you."

"What did you want?"

"I wanted to ask your pardon for something." She cleared her throat elaborately. "I suspected you at one time, I thought . . . that you stole some of my money. You remember, don't you? We were back there in the yard one day. You and me. I'm sure you remember, don't you? When you left the money was gone out of my tin cup. I thought, That one stole it. But then I said

to myself, No, he wouldn't do something like that. Made you a present of an apple, didn't he? He isn't going to give someone a present in order to steal from him. That wouldn't make sense, would it? And then I said to myself, You probably lost the money."

Ranek laughed softly. And now the hunchback laughed too.

"How funny," she said, "the situations people get into sometimes."

"Couldn't be funnier," Ranek said, and he added, speaking seriously, "No one's suspected me of a crooked deal so far."

"You're a decent person, that's all," the hunchback said.

Ranek nodded.

"And decent people you trust . . . trust, that's the reward."

"You're absolutely right," Ranek said. They grinned at each other for a while and then they looked back to the street.

A tall man came out of the yard, passed them without saying a word, and disappeared in the crowded street.

"I know that fellow," Ranek said.

"He moved in here a short while ago," the hunchback said, "you couldn't possibly know him."

"But I do. I recognized him from the pus boils on his head."

"Lots of people run around with boils on their heads nowadays."

"That's true. I know him anyway."

"He used to live in Lupu's coffeehouse," the hunchback said.

Ranek nodded. "I knew I was right."

"Lots of people from the coffeehouse now live with us," she said, "since Lupu's burned out."

"How long has it been since it burned?"

"About a week. Didn't you know?"

"I did, but I thought it had been longer. You lose your sense of time occasionally."

"That happens to all of us," she said, and she added softly, "That fire was terrible."

"How many people died?"

"Most of them," she said. "The pus-head told me all about it, how it happened. It was at night and by the time the people

had really woken up and knew what was happening the room was full of flames. Just think of it: all those people . . . and the confusion . . . and the locked door . . . with everyone wanting to be the first at the window, which of course wasn't possible."

"That's bad," Ranek said. "Is Itzig alive?"

"Couldn't be healthier," she said. "He's renovating already."

"And his wife?"

"She was killed."

"A pity. She was kind."

"Let's talk about something else," the hunchback said. "There are more pleasant things to talk about."

"Of course," he said. However, neither he nor she knew of something more pleasant that they could tell each other, and therefore they both fell silent. After a while a few more people left the yard: first a man, then a woman, and then two children.

"Do they live here too?" he asked.

"Yes, all four of them. It's not a family, however." She smiled. "A single man and a single woman . . . and the children . . . also by themselves."

"But the children belong together"

"Yes, but not the man or the woman."

"I know that."

"So you know them?"

"From the street," he said, "they're known all over town."

"The cigarette boy and the cigarette girl," she said, smiling. Ranek nodded.

"A little loudmouth, that boy," she said. "I can't stand his voice."

"You mean the song he's singing all the time . . . the cigarette song?"

"Yes, the song and the voice. A hoarse song, a hoarse voice. As hoarse as a coachman's voice. Even hoarser."

"Your voice is a little hoarse too, or didn't you know that?"

"But a worm like that," he said, "a worm like that with such a voice . . ."

"Yes, that gets on your nerves. That's true, all right. But the little girl is sweet. A very sweet child. Ljuba's her name."

"So, Ljuba's what she's called?"

"She never sings on the street."

"Why not?"

"Because the boy doesn't want her to. Because he doesn't want her to get a hoarse voice like that."

"That's what you call love," he said grinning.

He remembered something. "Yes . . . once I even heard the little one sing on the street."

"Perhaps the boy had lost his voice altogether at the time," she said. "Perhaps he was eating. Things like that do happen. Still, I'm surprised that he let her sing."

"Yes, you see, that's what it's like."

"Still, I'm surprised that he let her," she repeated, shaking her head. She asked, "Did she sing well?"

"Very badly," he said. "Too softly."

"Too softly?"

"So softly that you could hardly hear it. She didn't sell anything, either."

The hunchback nodded. "The people don't listen to soft voices," she said thoughtfully. "You have to shout if you want to be heard. That's people."

"Yes, you see; that's what it's like." He laughed. He rolled himself another cigarette. He spat on the newspaper and asked, "Do you want another?"

"No thanks. I'll throw up if I do." She gave him an astonished look. How nervous he was before, she thought; now he's suddenly in a good mood. A funny person. Perhaps it's good for him to gab like this for a while.

Now she pointed over to the main entrance. "Look over there," she whispered, "the big blonde who's talking to the doorman . . ."

"What's the matter with her?"

"Take a guess who that is?"

"From the brothel," he said smiling, "someone who sells her arse. Who else could that be?"

"You don't say something like that. That's ugly. They don't do that for the fun of it." She whispered, "She's one of those who came back."

He didn't understand at once what she meant. She saw him looking thoughtfully at the blonde girl's legs.

"In spring," she whispered. "You must be able to remember that? In spring all the whores were taken to the Bug. A few of them came back."

"What's that you're saying?" He suddenly woke up.

"I said back from the Bug."

"That's impossible."

"Do you think I'm telling you fairy tales. I sit here every day . . . day in day out . . . I know what goes on here."

"I used to know one of them. Betty was her name. They took her away too at the time." He described exactly what she had looked like.

"No, she's not among those who came back," the hunchback said. And she added, "If she's not among those who came back, then she's been shot."

She watched him with screwed-up eyes. She noticed that the cigarette had slipped out of his fingers, and she thought, You shouldn't have told him that . . . you shouldn't have . . .

"I don't believe you," he said suddenly.

"The business about their coming back?"

"I believe that all right, but I don't believe it about Betty."

"You liked her, didn't you?"

"She gave me some grub once," he said.

"How you must have liked her," she said, all shaken up, and she felt her eyes becoming moist with pity.

"I'll bet that she's back in the brothel," he said, and she noticed the insane glow in his eyes again. My God, she thought, my God, oh my God. So she gave him something to eat. Now you've roused his appetite.

"I have to go up," he rasped out. "I have to go into the brothel. I have to take a look."

"You've no idea what you want any longer," she said reproachfully. "First you want to go inside with the compact . . . now because of a woman. You're losing your wits you're so hungry. A person has to be able to control himself."

He wanted to get up, but she said quickly, "For God's sake

don't do something foolish now; don't go upstairs, the doorman will call the police and have you arrested. We're not allowed to. Wait until he leaves."

"So you really believe that he'll leave later on? Perhaps he'll be asked to come inside the house . . . eh?"

"I don't know for certain. But every so often he goes to piss; he's a son of a bitch, but he's human, right . . . and then . . . then the door is unguarded; then you can slip upstairs." She smiled sympathetically. "But believe me, there's no one there with the name of Betty."

Ranek got up.

"Are you going to the barber now?"

"Yes."

"Go. I'll call you later when the doorman leaves," and she added jokingly, "As far as I'm concerned you can go into the whorehouse and look around for that dead female."

3

Ranek lurched across the street. An old man was leaning crookedly and mutely against the dirty display window of the barber shop. Ranek gave him a little nudge with his foot. The old man tipped over and plopped down in front of the door. Ranek climbed over him without giving him another thought, opened the squeaking door, and stepped inside.

The room was filled with tobacco smoke. Those who were waiting their turn were squatting on the floor as usual, a few leaned drowsily against the wall, but most of them were staring impatiently at the delicate back of the queer barber and smoked to pass the time. There was also a burning cigarette at the edge of the peeling toilet table; the edge had numerous black notches.

As Ranek stepped into the shop, the assistant with the slick, wavy hair was just sharpening a curved blade on the old leather

strop while the barber busily lathered one of his customers. Ranek could see the customer's fat face looking at him in the mirror. He knew immediately who that was: the fat black market operator whom he had met once in the coffeehouse.

Ranek waited near the door. No one said anything to him. The fat man observed Ranek sleepily in the tarnished mirror, but evidently he had not recognized him. He can't remember you, Ranek thought. He noticed that the boy had finished sharpening the blade. He now handed it to the faggot, turned around, and stepped up to Ranek.

"What do you want, a shave?" The boy looked suspiciously at Ranek's face, then his ragged suit. He asked again, "What do you want, a shave?"

Ranek shook his head.

"A hair cut?" the boy said. "You'll have to wait your turn." With these words he turned around.

Now the barber turned around and made a face. "Unfortunately I have no extra chair for you, but if you'd like to wait, I'll be done with this gentleman shortly, and the other gentlemen are having their heads shaved only; that goes quickly."

The barber wiped his soapy fingers on his dirty apron; he had put the razor on the toilet table—next to the burning cigarette—now he picked it up again. "May I put out your cigarette?" he asked the fat man timidly.

"No, don't . . ."

"But you'll burn my table."

"You could get yourself an ashtray one of these days."

"Yes," the barber said softly. He approached the fat face with the freshly sharpened razor.

"Watch out," the fat man said anxiously.

"Really now," the fag whispered, deeply insulted.

"My skin is so sensitive," the fat man said. "You know yourself . . ."

"I shave your face every day," the fag said, "and you tell me the same thing every day, and your skin doesn't have a mark on it."

"But it burns so afterwards," the fat man said.

"I have a light touch," the fag said.

"Yes, I know. Perhaps you could give me a little cream? Do you have face cream?"

"Yes, homemade. It's very fine."

The fat man grunted, satisfied.

One of the customers on the floor said loudly, "That fellow doesn't have any worries with his bald head. We have to have our heads shaved."

The fat man laughed, "Be glad you still have some hair left."

The fag said, "They always have something to complain about."

The fat man said, "Believe me, hair doesn't make the difference; money does, you have to have money and you'll have the women running after you."

"That's true," the fag said uncertainly.

"Money," the fat man laughed, "that's the main thing. They're all just envious. All they do is envy me. You know, they can't stand it if somebody gets ahead in life."

"You're absolutely right," the fag said respectfully.

The fat man groped for his cigarette, but since his sizable head was resting on the head-rest and he could not sit up in this position he did not find it. "Give me my cigarette, boy," he said to the pretty apprentice.

"Usually I only smoke Nationale," the fat man said apologetically. "It's an expensive brand and you can't always get it. I'm smoking Plugars at the moment. They aren't bad, either."

"You shouldn't talk now," the fag said, "otherwise I might cut you by mistake."

"Don't even suggest such a thing!"

Ranek was squatting with the others, but because he became impatient he thought he would leave again and return later. He got back on his feet and stepped out on the street.

The old man was still lying in front of the door. The hunchback had come across the street. She stood by the dead man, scrutinizing him sympathetically. When Ranek stepped out of the door, she said to him, "I saw how you kicked that man."

"I didn't kick him," Ranek said. "All I did was touch him with my foot . . . Besides he was already dead."

"Poor old man," the hunchback said.

"Has the doorman left?"

"Not yet." And she reassured him again, "I'll call you as soon as he's gone," even though she knew she wouldn't call him—it was too risky after all.

She asked, "Did you achieve anything?"

"The barber has no time now. I'll try again later on."

"You know I thought about it. I really doubt that the barber will do any business with you." She reflected for a moment. "But perhaps he will . . . if you do him a favour."

"What do you mean?"

"You could get rid of the corpse for him. Why don't you tell the barber there's a corpse in front of his door blocking his entrance. Besides, he'll give you a tip." She grinned significantly. "Why don't you touch my hunchback? That brings luck."

He did. Then he stepped back across the corpse and opened the door. He called out, "Hey, Chief, could you come outside a second, please!"

"Who's calling me?" the barber asked the apprentice without turning around.

"The bum from before."

"Is he outside again?"

"Yes."

"What does he want?"

"What do you want?" the slicked-up apprentice called out.

"There's a corpse lying here blocking your doorway. Tell your boss to come outside for a second."

"Don't bother him!" the fat man cursed. "Can't you see that he's busy?"

"Go out and look," the barber hissed to the boy.

The slicked-up boy came reluctantly and lazily out onto the street, but when he saw the corpse the expression of assumed arrogance, which was for Ranek's benefit, disappeared from his baby face. "So it's true," he said, blanching.

"Certainly, what did you think?"

"I thought you were joking," the boy stammered, "just thought you wanted to annoy the chief because he didn't take you right away."

"Come, grab hold of him," Ranek said. "Come on, or are you scared?"

"I won't touch him," the boy blurted out.

"I just need a little help," Ranek said. "I can't do it by myself."

"No," the boy stammered, "no . . . not me."

"So you expect the chief to do it for you, eh? Come on! Don't just stand there! He's lying in front of your door. He can't stay there. Or do you want me to tell the chief that you won't do it?"

The boy was confused. He didn't know what to do. Ranek started to pick on him again. "Come on, get hold of him!"

Meanwhile several people had stopped in front of the shop and formed a semi-circle around Ranek, the boy, and the corpse. Another boy joined them from the other side of the street; he was holding a little girl by the hand: the cigarette boy and little Ljuba. Two whores stepped out of the brothel, accompanied by a soldier and a policeman; they were also attracted by the crowd forming around the barber shop and hurried across the street. When the people in front of the shop caught sight of the policeman and the soldier, they stepped aside, frightened, but then they noticed that the two men were off-duty; they smiled and nodded to them, and they also nodded to the whores, and then they again fixed their eyes on the corpse.

Ranek had finally convinced the boy. Ranek grabbed the corpse's legs; the boy reached under his slack arms. But the corpse was apparently too heavy for the boy—they couldn't budge him.

One of the whores—the big blonde—said to the policeman, "A poor old man who starved to death."

The policeman nodded indifferently. He said, "This is boring, let's go back and do it again."

"Why don't you wait just a moment?" the whore said. "I want to see whether the boy can lift him."

The excitement made the blood rush into the whore's face,

even though one couldn't make this out clearly for the thick layer of ersatz powder. She bent forward as far as possible, to see better, her arms jerked nervously back and forth, her big breasts seesawed. The people shouted encouragement to Ranek and the boy, and the whore joined in the chorus. The second whore was small and had dark hair; she was excited too.

Ranek and the boy changed position. Ranek took the heavier end, the boy the stick-like legs.

"Look," the black-haired one said to the blonde, and she pointed to Ranek's bent-over figure. "His arse is shining through his trousers." She said this much too loudly.

Someone in the crowd guffawed. "I bet he's still a bachelor."

"He's not going to last much longer either," the big blonde said sympathetically.

Ranek and the boy slowly jerked the corpse down from the sidewalk. They put him down flat by the kerb so that he couldn't be seen from the barber shop.

A cart loaded with corpses drove along the street. Ranek waved. The driver stopped for a second and shouted to Ranek, "We're loaded to the hilt; he can wait until tomorrow morning."

"One more won't make any difference," Ranek shouted back.

The driver went on. Ranek sent a few juicy curses after him; some of the people shook their fists after the cart as it disappeared, others simply followed it with their eyes without saying or doing anything at all.

The policeman said to the whore again, "Let's go—let's do it again."

* * *

The fat man had not been able to observe the crowd behind the display window except by looking at its reflection in the mirror—somewhat oblique and half hidden by his own fat face, which was obstinately in its own way. The barber was scratching away at his cheeks, careful and imperturbable as usual, without paying much heed to the impatient men sitting on the floor. The fat man was a special customer and was treated accordingly.

The barber was doing all the talking, informing the fat man

in a low, veiled voice of occurrences on the black market, of deals he had made with the fat man, and of other deals he intended to enter into with him, all of them matters that did not concern the people on the floor. Then the barber digressed to politics and later into a bit of philosophy. The faggot's soft voice acted like a tranquilizer and the fat man customarily took a nap during these one-sided conversations, not to wake up again until the barber took his head and dunked it into the washbasin.

Today, too, he was just about to doze off when he suddenly noticed something in the mirror that attracted all his attention. He blinked and became wide awake. "Hurry up a little today," he said to the barber.

"Why such a hurry?" But now the barber noticed how intently the fat man was staring at the mirror, and he glanced at the same spot on the tarnished glass.

"Because of the big blonde?"

"Yes, because of her. I want to catch her while she's still in front of the shop. Looks like a new one."

"Probably one of the ones who came back," the barber said. "They're not as new as all that. They used to be in the brothel months ago."

"She's still quite young," the fat man said, "doesn't have that used look. Don't you think?"

"You can't tell about that from looking through the mirror," the fag said, a little peevishly, but he hurried now so as not annoy this excellent customer.

When the fat man stepped out of the shop freshly shaved, the crowd had dispersed. He barely caught sight of the big blonde ambling back toward the brothel on the policeman's arm. A pity, he thought, but then he remembered that he could wait until the blonde came down again.

Now he noticed the slicked-up boy at the kerb, talking to Ranek, and he approached the two. You know that fellow in rags, he realized suddenly, while he looked thoughtfully at Ranek... that shrivelled-up face under the big hat, you've seen it, but he couldn't remember where. He grinned broadly when he saw the one in rags jabbing his naked toe into the dead man's mouth,

and now he heard him say to the boy, "You see, nothing but an empty hole. Didn't I tell you!"

"That's not true," the boy said. "He's got one tooth left."

"You're right," the man in rags said. "I didn't even notice. But you see, the tooth is worthless."

"Worthless?" the boy asked.

"Completely worthless," said the one in rags, "but if you want I'll pull it out for you." And the ragged fellow suddenly laughed uproariously. "You can hang it around your neck."

"Don't bother," the boy said.

Now the fat man patted the boy patronizingly on the shoulder.

"Well, little one, you did a good job."

"He didn't weigh much," the boy said. "He starved to death."

"Horrible, isn't it?" the fat man said theatrically, and then he gave the boy a friendly nod, threw another nauseated glance at the kerb, made a wide circle about the corpse, and slowly made his way over to the brothel. He did not hear what the ragged fellow said behind his back: "That fellow's well-dressed, isn't he? A silk tie, an elegant shirt, an elegant suit—what class. And did you see his shoes? Patent-leather shoes? Yes, my boy, genuine patent-leather shoes." Nor did the fat man hear the boy say, "That fellow's not bad off, that's all."

A Ukrainian militiaman staggered out of the brothel, drunk; he lurched towards the big blonde, who had stopped at the entrance and was still haggling with the policeman. The militiaman pinched her bottom, roaring drunkenly. The policeman cursed. The militiaman lurched on. The whore spat after him. The doorman at the entrance looked with apparent indifference at the points of his shoes.

The whore and the policeman started to haggle again. "Don't be so cheap," the whore said, "as if a few bills make any difference to you. The money isn't worth anything anyway. What can you buy with it now that everything is so expensive." They quarrelled a while longer. Then they disappeared in at the entrance.

The fat man, who was sweating, came to a stop in front of

the doorman. "Hot, isn't it?" the fat man said, panting. He wiped his brow with his monogrammed handkerchief and thought, Gab with the doorman until the blonde comes back down, and he said once more, "Hot, isn't it?"

"You'll just have to lose some weight," the doorman said, smiling.

"You're right," the fat man said plaintively. "I really have to go on a diet."

"Eat less cake," the doorman said, "less butter."

"Easy for you to say. But just try telling my wife that. She loves baking cakes. And who's going to eat them? Me, of course." His voice became tearful. "And the doctor's warned me that if I get any fatter it'll be dangerous for my heart."

"Yes, that's what they say," said the doorman.

"My wife simply won't believe that."

"Yes, that's the way it goes," the doorman said understandingly. "Everybody's got troubles, right? By the way, how is your wife? Where's she keeping herself these days?"

"She refuses to leave the house," the fat man said. "Since I've rented a place of my own she's becoming more and more of a homebody. She won't even go for walks any more."

"Well, well," the doorman said.

The fat man dabbed his handkerchief to his forehead again, lifted his elegant jacket, lowered his massive head, and sniffed a little embarrassedly at his sweaty shirt. Suddenly he remembered that he'd forgotten to buy the fruit he'd promised his wife; pears she wanted today. He thought angrily, She wants delicacies as if she were pregnant. "Do you think one can get anything at the Bazaar at this hour?" he asked quickly.

"Perhaps," the doorman answered laconically. "Why don't you give it a try?"

The fat man extracted his heavy wallet with some difficulty, opened it, fished out a crumpled one-mark bill with his clumsy fingers. "If the blonde comes down, tell her I want to talk to her. Here! This is for you." With these words he placed the one-mark bill in the hand of the doorman, who without changing his expression let it disappear in his trousers pocket.

"Don't forget! I'll be back."

"I will," the doorman said. "I'll tell her. But I'm sorry, you can't do it here. Take her somewhere else. You know yourself that civilians aren't allowed up."

"I'll ask the barber to let me use his store after closing time."

"A good idea," the doorman said, grinning. "I'm sure he'll let you do it there."

* * *

The cigarette boy and his little sister did not let the fat man out of their sight. They had seen him buy fruit and now they followed him back from the Bazaar to the Pushkinskaja. They lost him a few times in the crowd but always caught up with him again. Not until he had almost reached the brothel did the boy have the courage to address the fat man.

"Don't you want any cigarettes today?"

The fat man stopped and turned his sweaty face toward the boy. "So you're running after me again?"

"Cigarettes!" the boy said persistently. "Cigarettes!"

"I've got enough for today. Scram."

"I've got a new brand," the boy said quickly. "I'm sure you don't have it."

"What brand?"

"Nationale."

"You call that new? That's an old brand, you little shyster."

"If you don't want them you can have Papyrossas, Russian cigarettes. They no longer make them."

"With a cardboard mouthpiece?"

"Yes, cardboard, that doesn't get as wet."

"No, Nationale, you said? Let's see them!"

The boy held out the big wooden box with trembling hands. The fat man took a few loose cigarettes and put them in his vest pocket. While he was paying he looked interestedly at the little girl, who stood shyly behind the boy, sucking her thumb. "What's the name of your little sister?"

"Ljuba."

The fat man grinned. "You don't deserve to have a sweet little sister like that, a brat like you; they should have drowned you in the Dniester in October the way they did most little boys who weren't worth anything."

"We didn't come across the Dniester," the boy said. "We're not from Rumania."

"Oh? Where are you from, in that case?"

"From a Ukrainian village not far from Wapnjarka."

"Wapnjarka?"

"Yes," the boy said, "not far from there."

"But you talk like everybody here."

"I learned that."

"A bright boy you are," the fat man laughed, "my respects," and he added a little more softly, "Listen, would you like to earn something on the side, more than you make in a whole week with that lousy cigarette box of yours?"

"Certainly," the boy said briskly.

The fat man whispered into his ear, but the boy shied back. "No," he ejaculated, "that's out of the question. Ljuba is a virgin, she's only eight years old, she doesn't have anything to do with men yet."

"All right," the fat man said angrily, "but just remember, from now on I'll buy my cigarettes elsewhere."

"What do you want from Ljuba anyway? You could be her grandfather!"

"What's that got to do with it!" the fat man stormed. "What the devil does that have to do with it!"

At this moment the doorman said to the big blonde, who had been waiting for the fat man for some time, "Look over there! There he is, he's buying cigarettes. Why don't you go to him?" Thereupon the stately prostitute marched off.

When she reached the fat man, he was waving his fruit bag angrily above the cigarette boy's head. "Beat it," he screamed. "Don't let me catch sight of you again!"

"What is the matter? the blonde asked. "What is the matter?" She quickly drew the fat man away from the boy.

"A little bastard," the fat man gasped, "what a little bastard,

calls me grandfather just because I wanted to talk to the little girl."

So that's why, the whore thought . . . what a horny old goat. She said, "The doorman gave me your message. Have you made the arrangements with the barber?"

The fat man shook his head. "I changed my mind," he said hesitantly. "You know, let's make it another time. I'm ^{top} wrought up now. How about tomorrow? The same hour, around sunset?"

"What do you think you're doing, anyway?" The whore stopped short. "I waited fifteen minutes for you," she said, outraged, "and time is money . . . at least for me. You'll have to shell out in any case."

However, the fat man did not like the idea of getting nothing for his money, and since he did not want a scandal he quickly said, "All right. Come."

"Forget about the little girl," the whore said, smiling.

"What do you mean?"

"I've been around too."

The fat man gave a weak grin.

"A little kid like that, what does she know?" The whore soothed him. "I'll show you a good time. I know my business, believe me." She took his arm and led him quickly across the street.

In front of the barber shop the fat man said, "Wait here. I'll be back."

* * *

When the fat man stepped into the shop, the slicked-up boy whirled a load of dust and hairs into his face with his broom. The fat man gasped and came to a stop in the doorway. "Pardon me," the boy said, embarrassed, "I didn't see you coming." He started sweeping again, but more carefully and in a different direction.

The fat man made no reply. They're knocking off, that's good, he thought, that's good. He saw the barber prettying himself up

in front of the mirror; he had already changed jackets, the work jacket hung carefully folded over the only armchair. Otherwise everything had been cleaned up. The brushes, combs, and razors had disappeared; the wet towels lay in a bundle on the floor, and only the homemade hair creams and hair lotions still stood up on the wobbly dresser. But they were never taken away, not even at night.

What's that fellow in rags doing here again? the fat man thought, and his disapproving glance fell on Ranek, who leaned like a scarecrow with his back against the wall to the left of the entrance and was staring at the barber's back. The barber now dipped his hand into the washbasin, wetted his hair, and then, like a sleight-of-hand trick, he twirled a seductive lovelock into his hair.

The fat man cleared his throat.

"I saw you coming in," the barber said, smiling affectedly. "I'm all done. Is it on business?" Now he turned around. "Step up. Why are you standing in the doorway?"

He reprimanded the boy. "Can't you stop sweeping for a while! Or didn't you see the gentleman come in?"

"I'm stopping now," the boy said grumpily, and put the broom down.

The barber turned to Ranek. "I told you I've no use for your compact now. What are you standing around for? Come back tomorrow. Perhaps I'll have a customer by then."

The fat man thought, He's got a compact he wants to sell, and suddenly he started to laugh.

Now Ranek said, "All right, I'll come again tomorrow."

"Then get out of here," the barber said.

"You've forgotten my tip," Ranek said softly.

"Tip for what?"

"For the corpse."

"Why don't you give the poor man something," the fat man laughed.

"For the corpse?" The barber smiled. He looked back at the mirror.

"Why don't you give him something," the fat man said with a

grimace. "Give him a sip of water so he won't collapse right here or we'll have to carry him outside." He broke out into another whinnying laugh and swallowed in the wrong way.

"The gentleman is right," the barber said. "Do you want a sip of water?"

"A piece of bread," Ranek said, trembling, "a piece of bread isn't asking too much. It was a lot of trouble getting him away from your doorstep."

Outside the whore was impatiently knocking against the display window. The fat man made a sign to her that he would be coming immediately. The whore pointed across to the brothel, which meant as much as, You're not the only one, there are others waiting. Don't waste so much time.

In the meantime the barber, touched by pity, opened the middle drawer of the barber's chest, which contained some meat and a round of corn bread. He touched the meat and shook his head, then he touched the bread and considered cutting off a thin slice, but then he closed the drawer again because he had concluded that it was actually a shame to waste a good piece of bread on a living corpse like that. Why prolong the life of someone who had bungled things so badly?

He turned around again. "You weren't serious about the tip, were you?" He gave him a friendly wink. "It was just a favour you did me, wasn't it? Why don't you come back tomorrow, perhaps I'll be able to do something with the compact then."

Ranek kept his hands buried in his pockets; slowly he clenched his hands together; he made one step forward, but then he stood stockstill again. For a fleeting moment he had considered beating the soft face into a pulp, but now he became aware that he couldn't do it—he felt so weak he became afraid that he would collapse at the slightest effort. All he saw now was his own face, which stared back at him out of the mirror, startlingly white.

"Why don't you drop in again tomorrow?" the barber repeated; his voice now bore a trace of astonishment.

"At what time?" Ranek whispered.

"Any time you wish," the barber said, smiling. "Thank God the day is long."

The fat man waited until Ranek had shuffled out of the shop. Then he said, "Did you see that? He can hardly stand up any longer."

"I feel sorry for him," the barber said. "Life isn't easy. He's not long for this world either."

Now the fat man divulged what he had in mind.

"Will it take long?" the barber asked.

"About ten minutes," the fat man said.

The barber nodded moodily, but he had too much respect for the fat man to refuse his request. He called the apprentice. "Come, my boy. We're going for a little walk."

* * *

The faggot had picked the boy up off the street in the winter of 1941. The boy's condition had been catastrophic at the time, half famished, half frozen to death.

The faggot had been alone at the time and had thought to himself, You'll put the boy back on his feet. Just watch how well his childish body will look in a few months. Man is a social animal; everybody has to have somebody to be fond of. And that's what happened. He gave the boy plenty to eat and the boy recuperated quickly. The faggot washed the boy's hair, which was full of lice; he had rich, soft hair; he put waves into it and then he put homemade skin cream on the boy's face. He wasn't a barber for nothing; he knew the ins and outs of beauty care. And thus he fashioned the boy to suit his own purposes.

While they were walking up and down the street hand in hand, the boy said, "I couldn't clean up because of the fat man. He's always in the way. Now I have to sweep the floor again . . . at this time of night."

"The fat man is a good customer," the barber said, "a little favour, you understand. He'll be out again in a few minutes. Are you tired? Well, you can sweep tomorrow, then." He gave a saccharine smile. "We're having meat soup today. The fat one got the meat for me very cheaply, you understand. You've got to stay on good terms with people like that. Are you hungry?"

The boy nodded.

"It'll be comfortable . . . this evening," the barber said.

The boy didn't know what the barber was hinting at. Perhaps he was looking forward to the soup, he thought, and felt himself becoming hungry. Then he noticed the barber taking a keen look at his trousers, and he blushed and seemed to freeze at the same time.

They passed the shop that sold sacks. The barber went in with the boy. An old man came from behind the counter. "How's business?" the barber asked. Now he whispered to the old man: "I was told one could buy newspapers here."

"Who told you that?"

"Dvorsky. Dvorsky knows you, he said."

The old man nodded. "Discretion," he whispered.

"Of course," the barber said.

"Which one do you want? *Timpul*? *Sera*?"

"Both."

The old man soft-shoed it to the door and locked it; then he brought the papers; they were old editions, one from June 20, the other from July 17.

The barber read eagerly.

"Read them at home," the old man implored him, "not here."

"But you've shut the door," the barber said, and he thought, My God, the reports from the Eastern Front, my God, what reports.

"Not here," the old man whispered, "not here."

Now the barber stuck the papers inside his coat pocket and tossed a bank note on the counter.

"Thanks," the old man whispered, "thank you very much."

"That's all right," the barber said.

The old man shuffled to the door and opened it dutifully.

"Why don't you close your shop?" the barber asked, stopping at the threshold with the boy in tow. "You're the only one who's still open, and it's late already."

"Mr Stern hasn't come back yet. I must wait for him."

"Who is Stern?"

"He owns the shop."

"I thought—"

"Yes, it was mine once, but I sold it recently. I'm just an employee now. The papers go on my account, that's all," he said guardedly.

"The newspapers, oh yes, of course." The barber smiled indulgently.

"Let's go," the boy said, tugging impatiently at the fag's hand.

"Right away," the barber said, "right away, my boy."

"I live half an hour from here," the old man said suddenly, "and I still have to get home today. Mr Stern doesn't let me sleep in the shop."

"Then you'd better get going. It'll be dark soon. Or do you want them to catch you?"

"No," the old man stammered. "By the way, how late is it?"

"What does that matter! It'll soon be dark."

The barber turned to the boy. "So, we're leaving now."

They went back to the barber shop. "Good news from the Eastern Front," the barber said softly to the boy. "Just wait, we'll be liberated within the year." And he thought to himself, At the latest in two years. And if they aren't here by then, they'll be here in three.

"Do you really think so?" the boy asked tensely.

"Yes," the barber said.

"Is that what the newspaper says?"

"...pst... not so loud... Of course not, you fool, you have to read between the lines."

* * *

The last vendors were leaving the Bazaar. All the stands were empty. Only the man with the black patriarchal beard was still stationed behind his mobile stove, at his customary spot, the exit, corner of the Pushkinskaja, and he tried to hawk the rest of his ersatz knishes to the people hurrying home. He called out insistently, "Knishes... knishes... hot... still hot." But when the dusk became increasingly frightening and hung like a grey threat over his cart, and he could hardly distinguish one knish from the other any longer, he too realized that it was high time to leave.

He extinguished the fire in the stove, wrapped his goods in paper, then he started to push his cart as if the devil were on his back. As he turned the corner into the Pushkinskaja, he noticed a man who looked like a scarecrow, he stood there so mutely and broken in his rags, staring at nothing. He wore a funny-looking hat that was much too large for him and didn't seem right for his face.

When blackbeard approached, the scarecrow slowly turned his head, sniffed, and kept his eyes fixed on him. These damned beggars, blackbeard thought furiously. He'd been attacked before by the likes of this fellow, especially in the evening, when there was little traffic and little light; one time they'd knocked over his cart and stolen all his goods. He had good reason to be suspicious.

Blackbeard stopped a moment. He unclasped his pocket-knife and laid it on the cart, then he pushed on. The scarecrow at the corner of the street suddenly started to move and followed him, then it caught up with him and walked by his side, gasping.

Blackbeard stopped again. "Don't do anything foolish," he said threateningly. "Scarecrows like you I can cut down with my little finger."

"I don't want to steal," Ranek said. "Believe me."

"I believe you," blackbeard said. "You don't look as if you want to steal." He pushed on. Ranek did not leave his side.

"I have something to sell," Ranek said suddenly.

"Somebody like you doesn't have anything to sell," blackbeard said harshly.

Ranek showed him the compact. "Do you believe me now? I already have a customer for it but he doesn't want it until tomorrow."

"Why don't you wait until tomorrow, then?"

"I am hungry," Ranek said. "I have to get something to eat now."

"So . . . you must, must you?"

"Give me a potato knish, and you can have the compact."

"What am I supposed to powder with it?" blackbeard said, grinning. "My arse?"

"This is no joking matter," Ranek said. "There are enough people with money in the ghetto who want to give their women something and no one makes compacts here; you can't get them anywhere. You can sell it to someone else."

"I don't trade in odds and ends," blackbeard said without slowing down. "I sell kishes, *kapish*? Let me alone. It's late. I've got to get home."

"I have something else to sell," Ranek gasped. "My hat."

Blackbeard laughed. "It's summer now. Who needs a hat in summer?"

"Sometimes it rains."

"So you get wet. People have better things to do with their money than buying old, worn-out hats."

"I'll get rid of the hat all right," Ranek said, "don't you worry about that."

"You're even less likely to sell the hat in winter," blackbeard said. "A hat's no help in winter, you need a fur cap around here."

"Give me half a potato knish and I'll give you both, hat and compact." Ranek was barely able to keep up with his pace. "The hat and the compact," he gasped, "the hat and the compact."

They had reached the bakery in the Pushkinskaja. Blackbeard pushed his cart against the locked door. He knocked. Shortly afterwards a key turned in the lock and the door opened. The plump figure of a woman appeared on the threshold. "Oh, it's you," the woman said. She noticed Ranek. "Who's that?"

"He's got something to sell," blackbeard laughed, "a compact."

The woman spat in front of Ranek's feet. "I don't want to have any truck with thieves. Besides, I don't need something like that."

"I didn't steal it," Ranek said.

"He's got such an honest mug," blackbeard said derisively. "How could you possibly suspect him?"

The woman took charge of the cart. "We'll open up a little later tomorrow," she said to blackbeard. "You can pick up the cart around ten."

"Yes," blackbeard said, "around ten, then."

He said good-bye briefly and then hurried across the street. The woman slammed the door shut.

* * *

"Don't be so impatient," the barber said to the boy. They were back at the shop and pressed their foreheads against the display window.

"Ten minutes, he said."

"Yes, yes, I know."

"And it's more than twenty already since he's been fooling around with the woman on the floor," the boy grumbled.

"Patience, my boy, patience!"

"Why don't you call him? He seems to have forgotten how late it is. We can't stay much longer on the street."

"He'll be out in a minute."

"Why don't you knock!"

"For God's sake, no! He'd never forgive me for that. We can't annoy him."

"Is he going to get more meat for us cheaply?"

"Yes."

"Then it's all right." The boy suddenly laughed out loud. "Look what Fatty's doing to the woman now!"

"Nauseating," the barber said. "Simply nauseating. Let that be an example to you, my boy. It's always nauseating when you have something to do with a woman."

"But that isn't a real woman," the boy said.

"What? Not a real woman? What, then?"

"A whore," the boy said, "not a real woman."

"Who gave you that silly idea."

"Somebody told me."

"Somebody, eh? You spend too much time around the brothel; that's going to stop from now on."

The boy started laughing again. "Take a look! It looks as if Fatty's going to kill her."

"He's not going to kill her," the barber said. "It only looks like that."

* * *

Ranek had run around for too many hours to be able to make the long way back without first taking at least a short rest. He still hadn't eaten anything and felt as if he were about to collapse. Also there was that hideous empty feeling in his head and his skin itched as if ants were running all over it. He had wanted to sit down at the bakery door, but the baker's wife had lurked behind the door, ripped it open, and chased him away cursing. Now Ranek slowly shuffled back to the barber shop. He saw the barber and his boy standing at the display window and because he was afraid of approaching then he lowered himself, groaning, to the edge of the kerb—where the dead old man lay. Just a little rest; then you'll go on home as quickly as you can. He propped his aching feet on the corpse because the corpse was softer than the street.

The corpse was looking at him as though inviting him to lie down beside him. He seemed to be speaking his own soundless language: "Come lie down beside me. You can't rest sitting up. Why don't you lie down! And then they'll cart both of us away tomorrow. Be glad that it's all over. Be glad, you big fool."

Ranek sat there looking spellbound at the corpse, but then he shook his head. No, not yet! You're not going to give up simply because your legs have gone a little soft. Come on, get up!

But his legs refused to co-operate; they seemed to be speaking a language of their own exactly like the corpse, but with a different accent. They said, "First something to eat. Then we'll take you home."

He lifted his head wearily and looked across the street. The crazy notion that Betty had returned occurred to him again. The hunchback lied. Betty is back. Keep a close lookout... a voice whispered in his aching head... she'll be stepping out of the door any moment now. She'll call you. And then you'll go with her into the brothel and she'll give you something to eat, the same as last time. Of course. It has to be that way. He remembered what Daniel had said not long ago: "We deported the girls even though we knew they didn't all have syphilis. Precautionary measure. Nothing else. But nobody knows anything about this at the Bug." And then he had added, "There are whore-

houses everywhere. On the Bug, too. If Betty's healthy she'll find work there. And if you find work then you're useful. You understand? That's why whores usually are not shot. They're useful members of human society who have found their place in the new Europe. You are the only ones for whom there's no room left, for you and the likes of you are parasites. You're not useful any more."

If she hasn't been shot she must have come back with the others, it kept hammering desperately in his brain. Whether she'll give him meat today? Or only soup? Meat for sure! Just wait a little longer. When she steps out of the door she'll look over to the barber shop . . . and then she'll see you: she has to see you. Will she recognize you right away? Why not? When she saw you last you didn't look very civilized, either. So you can't have changed too much. The only trouble is that it's getting so dark on the street . . . that makes it difficult to see. Let's hope she comes before it becomes completely dark.

He felt he was becoming dizzy and dizzy, but oddly enough he didn't feel afraid, though he knew he could fall forward at any moment on top of the corpse. All he could see now was fog. And the fog was like smoke. And the smoke had the smell of the smoke that came from a frying pan. It wasn't eggs they were frying, he thought. Not potatoes, either. Suddenly he knew exactly what it was. Meat! It was meat! It really was meat! He inhaled greedily, he felt his stomach cramp together, how the cramp gradually subsided, as though there were something in his stomach had melted and ran off like ice, and he perceived a great feeling of gratitude simultaneously with one of melancholy, and then he noticed how his eyes were becoming wet and how it ran down salty into his beard stubble. He could not keep the tears back. He didn't want to, either. Not any longer. And then he suddenly saw her: Betty. But not at the door. Upstairs at the window. Her face was kind, there was a smile on her mouth. Betty waved to him. She waved and waved.

Ranek pressed his hands against his aching head and closed his eyes for several minutes. A little later, when he dared look up again and stared across the street, the mirage was gone. Every-

thing was gone : the fog, the smoke, her face, the waving hand. The only thing that had remained was the smell of meat—it hovered heavily like the smell of the corpses over the twilit Pushkinskaja.

Now he slowly tried to move his legs. Then he got up carefully. It was working, slowly but surely. In such a situation you couldn't stay too long in one place. He walked unsteadily across the street. Now he noticed . . . upstairs . . . at one of the windows of the brothel . . . a woman; an unfamiliar woman. No, it wasn't Betty. He came to a stop in the middle of the street. The street was completely empty. You really should get home now; it's almost night. He glanced down the street and across the houses that jutted like mute shadows into the darkness. He noticed several women smoking by the brothel wall, waiting for late customers. Every so often a man's figure emerged from the big house and disappeared around the corner. One could ask the whores if they've heard anything about Betty, he thought; just ask them, that's no trouble at all.

He staggered on. Just ask them once, just ask them. On the other side of the street he pulled himself together, tilted the hat even lower over his face and thought no particular attention would be paid to him that way. While he lurched past the whores lined up by the wall, he carefully inspected their faces; they all looked a little like Betty, but it was only the heavy make-up and the stiff smile that produced this resemblance. Ranek walked up and down the line a few times. They smirked at him and found him amusing. One of them whispered to him, "Want to do it?" And then she looked more closely at him and said, "Of course not." She added in a tone of admonishment, "You better go home, little one. Or do you want them to nab you? It's almost night. Or do you have a special permit?"

Ranek shook his head. "Do you think you could give me some information?" he whispered. And then he told in a few words whom he was looking for and why.

* * *

The fat man and the whore finally came out of the barber shop.

The fat man gave the apprentice three pears. "Because you had to wait so long," he said. "You're not angry by any chance, are you?" he asked the barber.

"No, I was just afraid for you, because . . . because it was getting so late."

"I have a special permit. They're not allowed to nab me."

"Of course, I didn't think of that."

"Can I eat the pears now?" the boy asked.

"We'll have supper in a moment," the barber snapped at him. "Save them for tomorrow."

The big blonde said, "Good night. Hope to see you again some time." Then she walked across the street.

"That one wasn't bad," the fat man said, "got a lot of action in her."

"That's probably why it took so long?" the barber said, trying to joke.

"After all, I'm not young any longer," the fat man sighed.

The barber smiled, then he said, "When do you want me to shave you tomorrow?"

"In the afternoon."

"In the afternoon, then?" The fat man nodded. He patted the boy's hair and then he said, "Good night."

"Good night," the barber said. "My regards to your wife."

"Thanks," the fat man said, and then he left.

"Come," the barber said to the boy. They stepped into the store and the barber locked the door.

The big blonde joined her companions in the meantime.

One of them said to her, "Did you see that fellow in rags who just went inside the brothel?"

"No, I didn't."

"Just imagine, he went right in."

"That's none of my business."

"I don't think he's quite right any more. Looking for Betty. Do you still remember her?"

"Of course."

"I told him that she wasn't shot; told him they hanged her. But he wouldn't believe me. He kept saying, You were treated

well there and you came back? Why not her? Why should they have hanged her? Tough luck, I told him. Or because she was so skinny, who knows. But he didn't want to believe that, either. The doorman had just left for a moment. That's when he went inside."

"Crazy," the big blonde said, shaking her head, "he's going to end up thinking she's up there."

4

Some time ago the doorman had affixed a sign in the back yard of the brothel. The sign said, "The cellar is not a toilet." Of course no one had paid any attention and the sign had disappeared and the doorman himself seemed to have forgotten all about it in the meantime.

The cellar room had become a stinking brown cesspool during the summer months, and the muck rose as far as the lowest step at this point. If the hunchback had not occasionally scooped out some of the muck, it would most likely have risen as far as the top step by now, and that was something that must not happen under any condition. For these steps represented home for numerous people.

The hunchback could still remember when she had been the sole inhabitant of the cellar stairway. She had often felt a strong desire to be able to sleep entirely by herself. She, like most people, believed that the right to be able to sleep by oneself without being disturbed was a right which only happy people enjoyed. But when she had finally found such a place, the loneliness began to weigh on her. People are never satisfied with what they have, she thought at the time. You used to live in a cowshed and wanted to leave it and now that you're finally alone you long to be back in the cowshed.

She remembered how the horror had sneaked up on her here.

It was uncanny how quiet the yard could be at night. The wind had shaken the gate and it seemed as if it wafted the ghost of the deserted Pushkinskaja with it into the yard. Occasionally noises from the back of the brothel would reach her—snatches of sound, the laughter of a whore, a drunken curse, or the sound of glass shattering—but these sounds too ceased after midnight, and then there were only the wind and the ghosts sweeping through the empty yard, and the steady splashing of the river behind the wall. Sometimes she found this impossible to bear and then she would go to the wooden bench by the wall, climb up on it, pull herself up along the wall and stare at the black river and scream until she was exhausted. This would soothe her because exhaustion also lulls fear to sleep.

Her isolation in the cellar had not lasted long. The news had spread that it was possible to spend the night there without being molested or chased away. Some people warned the cellar dwellers that it was only a trap, but no one heeded these warnings. At first people had come singly, a little fearful and suspicious, then they came in groups. They came and stayed. The hunchback was pleased. It was just like being back in the cowshed again.

When the coffeehouse burned down and there was a new influx, the situation threatened to become critical. There had been heated arguments and the hunchback remembered how the former coffeehouse inhabitants had got into terrible fights with each other because they all wanted to sleep in the cellar. But that was impossible. There simply wasn't room for that many. A few managed to secure a place on the stairs, the rest had to camp out in the yard. There was no lack of space in the yard.

It was comfortable on the cellar stairs tonight. One of the new arrivals from the coffeehouse had brought a kerosene lamp with him, which, supposedly, he had bought very cheaply from Itzig Lupu. Now it hung on a rusty nail above the stairs, giving off a soft light. People did not take the order for a complete blackout so seriously here, since the light could be seen from neither the street nor the river. A small group, consisting of two men, a woman, and a boy who was about twelve years old, was playing

poker. A few people were kibitzing. The hunchback, too, was following the game with great interest. The stakes consisted of potato peels that had been cut into sections of about equal size. The winner usually gave a share of his pot to his kibitzer and the hunchback had frequently received something to eat in this way.

The head of one of the players was covered with sores. He was a brutal fellow and one had to watch one's step with him. The second man was wearing a filthy wide bandage around his ears and called himself Max. The woman belonged to him. Her head was wrapped in a pretty red scarf at which the people kept glancing enviously. The fourth player was the cigarette boy; a little devil, the people said, because he was better at poker than most of the grownups.

The game had started well before nightfall and was more than two hours old at this point, but the participants gave no signs of tiring. The game became more and more heated. The man with the sores on his head was losing and was cursing like a hack driver. The cigarette boy did not have any luck either for once and was exchanging his third cigarette for new stakes. But Max and the woman with the red scarf kept winning continually.

The woman with the red scarf said, "Enough for today." The man with the dressing nodded. "Yes, Lea, you're right; it's time to go to sleep."

"Shit," the pus-head said to the fellow with the dressing, "we'll go on playing. Or do you want me to tear off your bandage?"

"Max," the woman said with the red scarf said, "we shouldn't have played with the fellow. Poor losers shouldn't play at all."

"Easy for you to say that, Lea." The pus-head laughed furiously. "You can't get out of it that easily. Do you want to see me tear off your friend's bandage?"

Now the hunchback gave the cigarette boy a shove; she had been squatting behind him the whole time and knew that she wouldn't get any thing any more today anyway.

"Stop! Now," she whispered into the boy's ear. "Otherwise there'll be a fight."

The boy glanced at her briefly and then he looked down at the next step, where little Ljuba sat observing him closely; the little

one was wide awake, though she should have been asleep long ago.

Suddenly the boy tossed the cards aside. "Max and Lea are right," he said to the pus-head, "we can go on playing tomorrow."

"You've got nothing at all to say," the pus-head said furiously, "you Tom Thumb."

"I'm good enough to play with," the boy replied impudently, "but I'm not allowed to open my mouth, eh?"

The man with the boils on his head was about to make a reply when a noise from the direction of the entrance to the yard made all of them look up. Someone had opened the gate and now slammed it shut again, and they could hear shuffling coming toward the cellar stairs.

"Who's coming at this hour?" someone who had been kibitzing said anxiously.

"The police probably," the man with the bandage replied. "That's what comes from all your shouting. Turn off the lamp."

But the steps were already too close and the best thing was to lie low and not move. A single man appeared in the entrance way and stopped there. His face was covered with blood. It was Ranek.

Little Ljuba was the first to break the sudden silence. She began to cry softly as only a child can cry when it sits up in bed at night and thinks the big bad man is standing in the middle of the room . . . and suddenly the light is turned on and it sees its mother and father. The cigarette boy quickly embraced her. "Be quiet," he whispered, "that's not the police, it's just a beggar."

"God, what a fright he gave me," the hunchback gasped, and then said to the intimidated people, "I know him, he's harmless." And with these words she rose and clambered up the stairs. The man with the boils broke out cursing again. He hadn't recognized Ranek. He was damning the troublemaker and the card game and God and the brothel and the cellar, but no one listened to him. The man with the bandage around his ears quickly gathered up the playing cards; they belonged to him and were as much his property as the woman with the red scarf, whom he

would never marry. The woman picked up the potato peels she had won and stuffed them into her battered handbag.

The people paid no further attention to Ranek. They had seen the hunchback rush up to him and overwhelm him with a stream of words and then disappear with him in the yard. He's an acquaintance of hers, they thought, who wanted to spend the night in the yard. If he had made any sign of wanting to spend the night on the stairs and displacing one of them, they would have rushed him like a pack of angry wolves. But the hunchback had said, "He's harmless," and the harmless ones were not taken seriously: they were unimportant since they were incapable of interfering in another man's fate. They pushed no one. They just walked past.

In the meantime the hunchback had led Ranek to the wall. Ranek was not seriously hurt. He just had a nosebleed. Though the blood streamed out of his face and ran over his chin, throat, and under his jacket, this would stop once he lay down and bent his head back. Ranek would have liked to lie down on the bench by the wall, but the bench was occupied. Therefore he lay down behind the bench with the other dark figures that were resting there.

The bleeding stopped after a while. He told the hunchback that he wanted to wash his face and then he got up and followed her to the place where there was supposed to be a bucket full of water. But the hunchback could not find the bucket at once and so they had to keep groping around in the dark.

"What are you doing around here at night?" she asked for the nth time. "You have a place of your own."

"Of course I have a home."

"You were in the brothel, right?"

"Right," Ranek said, "in the brothel . . . perfectly right." Now he pushed against the bucket; he bent down and put his hands inside. "There's no water," he said.

"The pigs have drunk it all up again."

"Where else can you get water?"

"At the street corner is a pump, but you can't go there now."

"Damn it!" He kept wiping his bloody face with his hands.

"So you'll wash yourself tomorrow," the hunchback said. "The main thing is that your nose has stopped bleeding." And she asked, "Did the doorman give you a beating?"

"Who else?"

"He's a bastard."

"I defended myself as best I could but he was much too strong; it just becomes more obvious every day how one keeps getting weaker."

"How could he beat you like that?"

"I'll pay him back for it one of these days," Ranek said, his voice trembling with hatred. "I'll get even with him as soon as I've got my strength back."

She nodded and thought, The doorman, he has a long wait. Poor Ranek, you don't look as if life had much left in store for you.

She said, "Yes, of course. I'm sure you'll get even with him."

They walked back to the wall; they sat down there and now Ranek told her why he'd gone into the brothel even though she had warned him. He told her everything at great length. He obviously seemed to enjoy talking and she knew why; his words also roused her appetite. When he was finished she said, "In other words . . . because you smelled the meat . . . that's why you went up? The whole street smelled of meat, you say, right? And the houses and the filth on the street?"

"I really smelled it," he said. "The same sort of thing happened to me only recently . . . but that was powder . . . today it was meat."

"I smelled powder too at one time," she said.

"Where?"

"On the toilet, downstairs in the shitty cellar." She tried to laugh and now he joined in too and laughed his bleating, joyless laughter.

"You can fight the smell of powder," he said then, "but the smell of meat drives you crazy."

"I can believe that."

"Later on, when I walked across the street, I knew I was just imagining it," he said. "I didn't really want to go into the brothel

any more because I told myself : that's nonsense. You're smelling things again that only exist in your imagination; but my legs . . . it was my legs . . . as if they had a will of their own, they simply walked into that damned house . . . they dragged me along, you understand?"

"Of course I understand," the hunchback said.

* * *

The light was turned off in the cellar. The night was muggy and pitch dark; it seemed only natural that it would rain after a day as hot as that. A light breeze wafted across the yard like the hot breath of someone in fever. The rain would have been a relief to the dry earth but for the people who slept in the open it meant only colds, sickness, and death.

One of the figures sleeping on the bench—a woman—now lifted her head and looked up at the sky. "My God," she whispered. "What do we do if it rains?" She looked for a long time into the darkness above her and uttered a low, fervent prayer. No drops had fallen yet. Perhaps the clouds would pass over. She bent to the side and felt her husband's legs . . . then her child's.

The child sat up. "Why aren't you asleep?" the woman asked.

"I'm hot," the child said. "I hope it rains soon."

"No, no," the woman said, "it's better if it doesn't rain."

"I'm thirsty," the child said.

The woman got up to get some water. For a while she strayed around the yard until she found the empty bucket. She lifted it up. She turned it upside down. And she went back to the bench.

"There's no water left in the bucket," the woman said to the child. The child lay back down. Angrily she pushed her father's legs to the edge of the bench, so far that the man would have tumbled down if the woman had not seen it and quickly pushed the legs back. Children are selfish, she thought, nothing you can do about that.

"Stella!" she said. "Stella! Don't do that again. Put your head on your father's legs. That way you'll be able to sleep."

"I don't want to lie on his legs," the child said, perking up.

"You'll do as I say! You understand! Otherwise I won't let you play with Ljuba tomorrow. You do want to play with her, don't you?"

"Yes. Hide-and-seek," the child said.

"All right. Then lie down on the legs now."

"Yes," the child said softly.

The woman did not lie down again, since there was so little room. She just leaned her head against the wide back and closed her eyes. The people who lay alongside the wall were snoring hideously. For a time the woman could hear nothing but their snoring, until the hunchback and the new one, whom the hunchback kept addressing as Ranek, began whispering with each other, and since they sat so close to the bench the woman could understand every word they said. She had also overheard the entire conversation before without actually wanting to.

Now Ranek said, "The man with the boils on his head stole something from me once. That was when I slept next to him . . . in the coffeehouse . . . under the table. But I couldn't prove it."

"Let him be," the hunchback said, "or do you want to get another beating?"

"I'll get even with him too one day," Ranek said.

Then he asked, "I saw him playing cards before. Who's the fellow with the bandage around his head who was sitting next to him?"

"That's Max," the hunchback said.

"Is he hurt?"

"As healthy as a horse."

"Why the bandage?"

"Sheer vanity."

"I don't understand."

"Last winter both his ears froze and he doesn't want you to see the ugly spots."

"But that doesn't matter."

"It's his secret. No one besides me knows it. I've known him for a long time . . . from the street. Knew him already last winter."

"Why does he make a secret of it?"

"Boils can heal," the hunchback said, "but your ears don't grow back. He's afraid that the woman will leave him if she finds out the truth."

The two were silent for a while. Then Ranek started again. "These stones are so damned sharp!"

"Don't gripe so much," the hunchback said.

"I'd like to be able to lie down on the bench."

"The bench is taken."

"I know that."

"Well, then?"

"Who's lying on the bench?"

"A woman, a child, and someone who's dying."

"Someone who's dying? Typhus?"

"I don't know what he has. His wife won't say." The voices became softer. The two laughed, then whispered again, and then the conversation died out.

"Mamma, I have to make peepee," the child said to the woman on the bench.

"Go ahead," the woman said crossly.

The child clambered down from the bench and squatted down by the wall. "Watch out," the woman hissed, "there are people sleeping there! Go a little farther away from the wall."

The child obeyed. Then she came back and lay back down. She asked, "Is Daddy going to die tonight?"

"I don't know," the woman said harshly.

"You never told me what he has."

"He's sick," the woman said evasively. "He is very sick."

The child yawned. For a while she played with her father's toes, then she asked, "Why do so many people die here?"

"Because they're damned."

"Is that why Daddy has to die?"

"If you really pray," the woman said, "perhaps he'll stay alive, then."

The child yawned again. Then she said, "I'm too tired to pray now. Can it wait until tomorrow? Or will he be dead tomorrow?"

"Be quiet now," the woman said, "be quiet now."

* * *

The woman had fallen asleep in a seated position. But before she had slept for long a furious noise from the cellar woke her again. Obscene songs were being shouted in the cellar, coarse laughter, and the moaning of little Ljuba mingling with it like a grotesque accompaniment. Now she could distinctly hear someone calling for help. My God, she thought, the cigarette boy. She listened, her heart racing. The uproar came closer. "Stella," she whispered, "come here." She now sat so that the child was concealed behind her back. "Keep very quiet," she whispered, "and don't be afraid if they shine their flashlights over here. They won't be able to see you."

However, no one approached the bench. The noise abated, moved farther away, and then died out in the street.

The woman now bent over the back of the bench. "What happened?" she asked the hunchback.

"I'll find out right away," was the answer.

The hunchback ran to the cellar. The woman on the bench stared after her. The child asked, "Mamma, have they gone?"

"Yes, gone."

Ranek's voice : "You don't get much rest here either, do you?" He pulled himself up on the bench and brought his mouth close to her ear : "Can I sit for a while next to you on the bench?"

"There's no room," the woman answered, and she thought, God, does he smell awful!

"Just a few minutes," Ranek said, "my behind is sore from these stones."

"No room," the woman snorted.

The hunchback came back from the cellar. "Just imagine. There were three soldiers there. Dead drunk. They took Ljuba with them."

"Horrible," the woman on the bench gasped.

"The cigarette boy went along," the hunchback said. "He didn't want to let the little one go by herself."

"Didn't the soldiers chase the boy away?"

"He didn't let them chase him off. They were so drunk they took him along in the end."

"Perhaps they want the boy to be there when the little one loses her virginity," Ranek said, "that's twice as much fun."

The woman on the bench said once more, "Horrible. How old is the little one?" she asked then.

"Eight," the hunchback said.

"Mine is seven," the woman said.

"Then she still has some time," the hunchback said soothingly.

* * *

When it started to rain there was a real panic in the yard and it seemed as if the chase was on again. Many people who had fallen asleep again after the incident with Ljuba and who were snoring peacefully on the bare ground, awoke from the cold shower and staggered up, befuddled with sleep, only to run into each other. Anxious cries resounded in the dark. Some people tried to seek shelter in the cellar, but the cellar inhabitants had relit the lamp in the meantime and kept such a sharp lookout that no one slipped inside. Luckily the wind had increased and because it blew from the direction of the street, whipping the rain diagonally across the yard, a strip of earth near the wall of the house remained dry. There the people lined up. Some stood pressing their backs against the wall; others, who were too weak to stand, crumpled down by the wall and fell asleep again. Only the dying man on the bench and a few half-dead persons by the other wall lay unsheltered and were soaked like pieces of washing.

Ranek had not joined the general flight at once. He too had fallen asleep and had been surprised by the rain, but since he sat next to the bench he had chosen the simplest method of escaping the wet: he had crawled underneath.

He was not the only one. The dying man's wife and his child had also sought shelter there. Anxiously they made room for him. For a while everything went well, but then the rain started whipping under the bench.

"Mama, we're getting wet," the child said.

"Go and stand against the wall," the woman said. When the child had left she turned to Ranek. "Do you think it'll stop soon?"

"I don't think so," Ranek said.

"I can't let my husband lie on the bench any longer," she said suddenly.

The rain increased. When the water started to rush under the bench, Ranek crawled out from underneath. "Are you going over there now?" the woman asked. "Yes," he said. He wanted to away but the woman clutched his feet. "Help me!" she gasped, "please help me; I can't let him lie on the bench like that."

Ranek tore himself free, but she ran after him and kept screaming, "Help me!"

Ranek reached the wall of the house. He ran alongside the wall until he came close to the cellar entrance, where he spotted an empty place by the gutter. There he planted himself against the wall. His face was wet; the rain had smeared the crusted blood again. He wiped his face, then looked at his hands and noticed that they looked as if he had dipped them in red ink.

"What do you want from me?" he said to the woman.

She stood trembling beside him and looked at him mutely. The weak glow of the cellar lamp fell on her face. It was an embittered face that was pointed and grey under the dark kerchief. The woman wore a pair of glasses. The glasses were wet with rain; it looked as if she were crying.

"What do you want?" he asked again.

"You know what I want," she said.

"There's nothing I can do for you," he said.

"He can't stay on the bench."

"Then why don't you take him down yourself?"

"I can't do it alone. Won't you help me?" She added quickly, "I don't want it for free. I'll give you something for it."

"Bread?" he asked cagily.

"I don't have any bread. I'll give you some beans."

"What kind of beans?"

"Come on. Please! Quick!"

"What kind of beans?"

"Real beans, speckled ones. Really!"

"Let's see them."

"I have seen them in my pockets. Come on. Quick!"

"Let's see them first!"

The woman searched hurriedly in her pockets; when her hands reappeared they were clenched into fists. Ranek laughed hoarsely. He watched the hands unclench.

"You see?"

Ranek nodded. "All right," he said.

"Are you coming now?"

"Yes."

He followed her through the pouring rain. When they reached the bench it was empty. No trace of the man. "Where is he?" he asked. "He was here just a second ago."

Suddenly she said, "Here!"

Ranek quickly bent down; his hands struck against the man's body. He had slipped off the bench.

* * *

While Ranek and the woman were still busy dragging the dying man across the yard the cigarette boy and little Ljuba returned from the brothel. The girl sat quietly down on the cellar stairs. The people avoided her shyly. Instead they asked the boy one question after the other: "What happened? Did she lose her virginity? Did she scream? Did she faint? Is there something we can do for her?"

"Nothing happened," the boy said.

"Eh?"

"I was there."

"Well, what did happen?"

"The soldiers dragged Ljuba into the brothel," the boy said. "I told them I wanted to go with them to the room. All they did was laugh. And then one of them said, 'If you like to watch, come along.'"

The people were amazed. "So you really went along?"

"Yes."

"And what then?"

"The whores interfered. They wouldn't allow it. You should've seen them! The soldiers were so drunk they could hardly stand up. The whores fought them and pulled Ljuba off the bed. And they wouldn't allow them to."

"So they wouldn't let them?"

"Don't you believe me?"

"No."

"I can't believe it myself," the boy said, "but it's true, anyway."

"Well, all right. We believe you. Must have been quite a shock for the little one."

"She doesn't even know what it was all about," the boy said. "She has no idea. After all, she's still a child."

"Of course."

"She asked me on the way back why the soldiers wanted to put her in bed."

"And what did you say?"

"I told her, 'I don't know.'"

The conversation at the cellar entrance was suddenly interrupted. A man's hoarse voice screamed, "Make room! Let's go! Room!" The people saw a man and a woman come out of the rain. The two were dragging a human package by its arms across the wet earth. The people moved a little to the side and made some room for them along the wall.

"That's the new one," said the cigarette boy.

The people watched indifferently as the woman knelt down beside the dying man, desperately trying to wring out his soaked clothes. Ranek pulled the woman coarsely away from the man and proceeded to bundle him together; he pushed the man's head down on his chest, crossed his arms, and then pulled up his legs. "So that he won't take up as much room," he said to the woman. Then he called to her, "Go and get the child. All of us can sit here where it's dry."

The woman went out into the rain again. She found the child at the other end of the house wall, freezing. She took her by the hand and came back. Meanwhile Ranek had sat down next

to the dying man. When the woman returned with the child he was just shaking the rain out of his hat.

"Sit down there," the woman said to the child.

"Next to the man?"

"Between the man and Daddy," the woman said.

"Is that Daddy?" the child asked, pointing at the wet package on the ground.

"Yes, that's Daddy," the woman said.

* * *

Ranek got his beans. The woman warned him, "Don't eat them without cooking them first. Wait until you have a chance to cook them."

Ranek paid no attention to her. He was ravenous and the beans sweated in his hand, and he did not want to wait, he could not wait. He ate, and shortly after he threw up. The woman with the child edged away from him, nauseated.

He did not feel himself falling asleep. When he awoke it was dawn. The rain had stopped. It was warm and tranquil. Soon the sun would rise in the east.

He thought of everything he intended to do this day. The compact! Of course! He had to get to the barber's right away. And afterwards? Afterwards he would find something to do with himself. After all, he wasn't completely finished yet, not like that pile of bones by the wall. Just don't let yourself go, he thought, that's the main thing.

Someone stepped out of the cellar. It was the man with the bandage around his ears. He stepped tentatively out into the twilight yard and inspected the sky.

The woman with the glasses, who was also awake, called him to her: "Max, Max, come here a second!"

"Good morning," Max said. "How's little Stella?"

"Thanks. She's sleeping."

"And your husband?"

"This morning I thought that . . . that . . ."

"Yes, I understand," Max said.

"Not yet," the woman whispered.

"Hasn't died yet," Max said, as if he were compelled to finish what she could not express.

The woman nodded weakly.

"You're doing a lot for him," he said, and he asked, "Is he dry already?"

"Not quite," the woman said.

Max checked the dying man's clothes. "Yes, yes," he said, "not quite. Put him out into the sun later on. It's going to be a nice day."

He yawned lazily. "You know, don't you, that Lea and I are moving today," he said then.

"Yes, someone told me. Where are you moving to?"

"To the old railway station. There are old railway cars in which you can live. There's even straw in them. Not bad at all."

"Is there any more room?"

"No," Max said, "I was there yesterday . . . two places are becoming free today . . . I know . . . two places and no more."

"Protection?"

"Of course. My brother lives there. He's going to reserve the places for me today. Otherwise we would have never got them."

"Isn't there anything you can do for us?"

"No. We can only be grateful that they're taking us in."

He gave the woman a self-satisfied grin. Suddenly he asked, "Aren't you feeling well?"

"We can't stay here," the woman said in a choking voice. "We have to find a place to stay. Otherwise the child will die too. Not everyone can live in the open like this; first my husband . . . and then the child."

"Don't speak of the devil!"

The child had awakened. She had been sleeping in her mother's lap. Now she scrambled to her feet and walked sleepily toward Ranek. But the woman quickly pulled her back. "Stella! she scolded. "Don't go to him. He's been sick. Don't step into it. Stella, don't step into it."

5

Early that morning the doorman had a special request for the barber. "If you see that bum around here again," and he gave an exact description of Ranek, "could you come over and let me know in case I'm not at the entrance; there's some work I have to do inside the house this morning . . . a broken bed . . . has to be repaired; so in case I'm not at the entrance, come inside the house for a second. Don't be embarrassed." And then the doorman told him how the bum had sneaked into the brothel the previous night. It hadn't been the first time, either. "But this time I gave him a good beating," the doorman said, "but that doesn't settle the matter by any means. This morning one of the girls complained about some money missing out of her handbag. Stolen! What else? It's obvious who's the suspect. The bum, of course. He was long enough in the house. So, if the fellow comes by your place . . ."

* * *

The fellow had just entered. The barber immediately put on his jacket and stepped out of the store. The damned favours you always had to do, he thought angrily: today the doorman, yesterday the fat man, and another time those filthy whores; everyone wanted favours from him. And one didn't have the courage to refuse them; no, one simply didn't have the courage.

He was particularly annoyed when the whores came to ask him for favours. Generally they came only to borrow money; some flattered him, others tried to blackmail him by threatening him with their connections, and then there were some who

simply mocked him. A filthy bunch they were, but they were fully aware that he was afraid of them and that he always shelled out, although he cursed them under his breath.

For instance, the little dark-haired one came to him yesterday.

"How are tricks, friend?" she greeted him.

"Thanks," he said.

"Nice weather, isn't it?" the whore said, and grimaced.

"Yes," he said suspiciously.

He was unaccustomed to her friendliness. The little dark-haired one had always been much more standoffish than the rest of the girls. And so he thought to himself, She wants something too. But she's not going to get anything for free, don't let her get that idea; I'll lend her something but that's all; damn it; I'd be crazy if I did anything else.

"Listen," the little black-haired one said, smiling at him, "you helped Clara out the other day, didn't you?" She gave him an unpleasantly hard look. "Couldn't you help me out too just once? I don't want much . . . just two marks . . . it's urgent." The whore had stepped up close to him and breathed into his face, a sweet, lascivious breath, as of halva or sugared almonds. "Listen," she said intimately, "I don't want it for nothing. You understand?" She winked at him. "I've done it with fags before; you won't be the first." She laughed. "I can also play the role of the man if it has to be. It's no trouble at all for me. You see, I have . . ." she lisped shamefully into his ear, "a hairy arse . . . do you like that?"

"No, thanks," he said, "you know I live very conservatively, but I'll lend you something if you want. But I'd like to have it back, if you understand what I mean. I'm not so loaded that I can just throw it away."

He had walked hesitantly across the street and now he stood in front of the brothel not quite knowing what to do next. There was no trace of the doorman. Probably still repairing the bed, he thought. He felt a strong antipathy to going inside, but he pulled himself together and said to himself, Let's go, Joshku, you promised the doorman and there's no way of getting out of it now; it's only unpleasant that people see you going inside

... you into the brothel ... ha ... ridiculous ... ridiculous ... what are they going to think? He took an embarrassed look around, and then he suddenly stepped decisively inside.

He had to shout several times before someone answered from the second floor. He waited. He tugged nervously at his tie. Then he heard muffled steps on the cheap, worn-out stair carpet, and shortly afterwards the doorman appeared in the doorway. He was not wearing a shirt, only a discoloured undershirt below his purple braces.

"Oh, it's you," the doorman said, bored, as if he had forgotten all about their agreement.

"I was to let you know," the barber said timidly, "if ... if that bum turned up again ..."

"Oh yes, thanks, nice of you to think of it. But the business with the stolen money is cleared up."

"Cleared up?" the barber said almost in a whisper.

"The girl found her money ... in her stockings."

"Found it?" the barber said, disappointed; he suddenly felt superfluous, utterly superfluous and even more ridiculous.

"How's your apprentice doing?" the doorman mocked him. "Is he pregnant already?"

The barber's mouth twitched with confusion.

"Is he already pregnant?" the doorman asked, grinning.

It took the barber a few seconds to control his fear, then he became furious. One had to tell this show-off that one wasn't afraid of him even though one really was afraid, but you had to show it to him anyway; after all, one wasn't a fool.

"He was pregnant," the barber drawled, "but he had an abortion." The barber whinnied like a horse about his own joke and then he let the doorman stand there and walked with graceful little steps out of the house.

He walked back across the street. But a few steps from his shop, he suddenly became afraid. Now you've really done it, he thought; he'll never forget that joke, he'll stick the police on you one day ... and so he quickly turned around again in order to apologize.

* * *

"He's going over to the brothel a second time," Ranek said to the apprentice. "What does that mean? What business does he have there anyway?"

"I don't know," the boy said evasively. "Don't go away. He'll be back."

The boy opened the drawer and took out a ragged film magazine, put it into his hand and politely asked him to wait in the armchair. The boy's attentiveness stupefied him, but because he did not become suspicious and told himself that the boy had his moods too, he thanked him briefly and began to involve himself in the magazine. With astonishment he gazed at the strange pictures; they were the pictures of a fairy-tale world, unbelievable, unimaginable; he tried to read, with screwed up eyes and an open mouth, but the letters soon started to blur, as did the photos, and he put the magazine away again.

When the barber came back, he slowly swivelled around in the armchair, then got up with much effort and walked toward him. The barber's face was fixed in a transfigured smile; he had relieved his conscience and was in a good mood now. He whispered to the boy, "It's all right now."

"I'm sorry to have let you wait so long," he now said, turning to Ranek, and he placed his hand in a comradely gesture on his shoulder, as if he had to make amends to him. "Don't worry. I'll buy the compact. Don't have a customer for it yet but I'll buy it anyway. Frivolous of me, isn't it?"

The barber cleaned his nose awkwardly and repeated, "Frivolous, isn't it? But we are still human after all. The compact must be your wife's who has died? Am I right?"

Ranek nodded. "She died all of a sudden," he said.

"You have my sympathy," the barber said kindly. "I can understand your feelings . . . the last keepsake you have of her probably, right? But the hunger, what? You have to sell it."

"Yes," Ranek said.

The barber picked his nose again. "I can't give you any money unfortunately but if you would like some food . . ."

"Fine," Ranek said. "Do you have potatoes?"

The barber shook his head.

Ranek asked, "Flour or bread?"

"Unfortunately not." The barber waved to the boy. "Do you still have the pears that fat man gave you yesterday?"

"No," the boy said, "what do you think, I finished them off long ago."

"You still have them," the barber said angrily, and his falsetto almost cracked. "Come on! Hand them over!"

"I don't have them," the boy said stubbornly.

Now the barber went to their bed and took the pears from under the pillow; they were slightly crushed and had dark brown spots. Ranek wanted to say no, out of the question, I want to have potatoes or flour or bread, you crook, you lousy crook, but the barber was holding the pears under his nose. "As sweet as sugar," he giggled. "Well, do you want them?"

Ranek's mouth began to water and his hand that held the compact started to tremble. The barber took the compact gently out of the hand and put it in his pocket. Then he gave him the pears. He patted him once more kindly on the shoulder, opened the door, and shoved him gently outside.

Ranek stumbled down off the kerb; he stepped on the dead old man in the gutter but he hardly noticed it—he had already started to eat. He neither heard nor saw anything nor had any idea what was happening around him. When Nathan had been alive he had said to him once; Ranek, hunger is like a worm; it gnaws and gnaws and you feel it slowly but surely devouring you from inside. You feel like puking it out and stamping on it, but that's impossible, Ranek. You can't get rid of the worm. All you can do is soothe it, calm it down, give it something to eat. That will keep it busy. Then it will let you be.

Ranek felt himself becoming hot from eating. He wandered along the street like someone in a dream. He felt absolutely happy. My God, he thought, I've become hot all over, I've become hot all over.

6

The accident at the latrine had occurred at night, before it had begun to rain. The old Levy woman had been the only witness.

They had squatted on the board, she and a certain Thaler. The old woman knew him only by sight; all she knew about him was that he too slept under the platform, but closer to the window; she had never had anything to do with him personally. During the conversation, which ensues inevitably when an old woman sits comfortably next to a young man on the shit board on such a warm summer night, the young man had complained that he had been suffering from diarrhoea for weeks and thus felt very weak. And then he suddenly said he didn't feel well. Thereupon the old woman said a few encouraging words, and also nodded encouragingly to him though it was pitch dark and the young man couldn't see that, and then she concentrated again on her own intestines. When she looked up a little later she barely saw the squatting shadow beside her crumple with a choked sigh, fall with a clatter onto the wet board, slip forward, and plummet head forward into the pit.

The old woman ran back into the house to inform the people, but while she was hurrying up the stairs, she remembered that the same thing had happened before and that it had also happened at night and no one had come to help. How were you going to fish somebody out of that hole at night? And this one, she thought, did not even utter a scream when he fell; perhaps he died up there on the board, and when he tumbled down he was already done for. And to fish a dead man out of the hole at

night was utter nonsense. After these thoughts the old woman lay back down to sleep with a calm conscience.

* * *

Early in the morning, during the first rush to the latrine, the old woman stood gabbing near the hole, telling everyone who mounted the board what had happened that night, but most of the people did not even listen to her, since they had stomach cramps and had no time to waste with the old woman. They staggered with twisted faces to the board and emptied their bowels.

Dvorsky and his wife stood beside the old woman. Red and Sigi also joined her now and heard her describe everything once more in detail. The old woman kept pointing to the spot where the man had drowned.

"You can still see air bubbles coming up," Dvorsky's wife said.

"Nonsense," said Dvorsky, "the people on the board make the bubbles."

Red laughed. "What if the dead man knew that we're shitting on him."

"The dead are always shit upon," Sigi said, "even if they aren't buried in a latrine."

"It's a disgrace," the old woman said; "one should really try to fish him out."

"You need a few really long poles for that," was Dvorsky's opinion.

"It would be possible to get hold of the poles," Sigi said, "but who's going to fish him out? No one will want to do a lousy job like that."

"Then go on shitting on the corpse," Dvorsky's wife said. "You don't think we're going to get grey hairs over that, my husband and I. We have other things to worry about."

The four were so wrapped up in their conversation they did not notice Ranek coming back from town. Ranek, of course, realized at once that something had happened at the latrine, but

because he was so tired he went right up to the room without investigating.

* * *

Ranek slept until well into the afternoon, and he would have gone on sleeping if hunger hadn't awakened him. The pears hadn't helped much, he thought, they had been only an hors d'oeuvre. He shuffled to the stove and drank some cold water.

Moishe was stirring a millet pap for himself and the child. Ranek tapped him on the shoulder and offered him a cigarette butt. Moishe accepted it and thanked him.

"Could I have a taste of your millet?" Ranek grinned.

Moishe gave him back the butt. "Let's not even start this," he said smiling.

He asked, "Why don't you go to the soup kitchen like your sister-in-law?"

"Because one's turn never comes up anyway, except if you know someone. I don't know anyone."

"But you could at least try it," Moishe said. "Deborah is trying it."

"I have tried it," Ranek said. "I have tried it too often."

Moishe stared thoughtfully at the steaming pot. Then he tossed some more wood into the stove. Ranek now asked him about the incident at the latrine. Moishe told him everything; he also told him that the place where the dead man had slept had been taken already and that Red had made some money selling the place.

"Usually Sigi is the fastest when it comes to selling sleeping places."

"This time Red was cleverer. He found somebody immediately."

Moishe patiently stirred the millet soup until it was done. Then he went to the platform where the baby lay, without anyone watching over it, kicking its little legs. A few places farther on sat the wife of Axelrad, the businessman. She sat quietly beside his motionless body and sobbed softly.

"What's the matter with the businessman?" Ranek asked.

"That's the second one today," Moishe said, and he proceeded to feed the baby. He was obviously going to a good deal of trouble. "A pity Deborah isn't here," he said to Ranek. "She's better at feeding him than I am."

"When did the businessman die?"

"Half an hour ago."

"Why doesn't someone carry him outside?"

"Do you want to carry him outside?" Moishe gave a broad laugh. "You see! Who's supposed to carry him outside? If anyone then Seidel. Seidel has been his neighbour since the businessman and his wife moved onto the platform. You understand what I'm trying to say? Seidel will carry him outside." Moishe shrugged his shoulders. "Unless he's so lazy as to prefer sleeping next to a corpse."

Ranek nodded. "Where's Seidel?" he asked then.

"He always stays in the Bazaar until late."

"That'll be quite a surprise for him."

"Yes, of course," Moishe said absent-mindedly, and then he said to the baby: "Look . . . there comes a zeppelin . . . whoosh." Moishe made circular motions with the spoon and the baby opened its mouth, and Moishe quickly stuck the spoon into it. "Whoosh," he said once more, "and now comes another zeppelin."

* * *

The idea that he could earn something by selling the dead businessman's place did not occur to him until later, when he was at the latrine.

The woman's moans penetrated through the open window into the yard. At first she had only sobbed quietly to herself and not once turned her head from the dead man, but now she had probably gone mad, therefore all that screaming. She'll calm down again, Ranek thought; she'll scream for a while and then she'll quiet down.

He concentrated his thoughts, now and gradually his plan

neared completion. Besides Moishe, the baby, the woman, and her dead husband no one was in the room at present with the exception of a few half-dead persons. Ranek knew that Moishe was not interested in selling the place, because he never bothered with that sort of thing; the businessman's wife had other worries and the half-dead ones did not have the initiative and therefore did not count. Red, Sigi, and the others were still in town and did not know anything about the corpse.

He dropped dead at a good time, Ranek thought, yes at a damned good time. Now you have a chance. They probably won't get home before dusk and it was not likely that the traders would get underway once more at that late an hour; they would probably try to sell the space as early as possible in the morning. He had to beat them to it this time. He had to find a customer right away, and he had to get him quickly, without causing any commotion. But where was he to find a solvent customer in such a short time? Someone from the bushes? That was close, but the people in the bushes were poor sods, all of them. No, he thought, not one of them.

And then he suddenly remembered the woman on the bench in the back yard of the brothel, little Stella's mother. He remembered how she begged this fellow with the bandage around his ears, this Max, for a place to sleep and how the man had laughed in her face. The woman was in despair; she was in a state of mind that was just right for his purposes: the state of mind that makes you soft and afraid. Ranek had no idea whether she had any money but he had seen a wedding ring on her finger. Perhaps she would give him the ring. One had to handle the matter the right way; that was all that counted.

He remembered something else. The woman, the child, and the husband—that made three, but all he had was one space. Would the woman be satisfied for the time being? Perhaps not, he thought, but there had to be a way to solve that problem, too. You'll think about it on your way, he said to himself.

Ranek left the latrine in a great rush.

He was out of breath when he arrived in the back yard of the brothel. He looked for the woman but could not find her or little Stella anywhere. Only the man again lay motionless on the bench—Ranek and the woman had put him back there in the morning.

Ranek made inquiries and was told that the woman and the child had gone to the soup kitchen. "She knows the fellow who ladles out the soup. She always gets a plateful of soup. You can find her there every day at this hour."

Ranek renewed his search. He had not been to the soup kitchen for a long time and had forgotten how you got there from the brothel. Because the streets had no signs and since the information people gave him was inexact and confused him even more, he headed in the direction he felt was right. He must have strayed about for more than half an hour among the rubble fields that stretched east of the Pushkinskaja to the edge of the city until he finally found a long row of people who were standing in line. There was more than one line; its head started at the soup kettle but its tail reached far into the wasteland. Ranek guessed that there were several thousand people. Watching carefully, he walked along the lines; everywhere people who had fainted lay around—silent and pale on the naked earth as though they never wanted to get up again. The line progressed only slowly. People stepped on those who had fallen, or stepped across them. Deborah must be standing somewhere too, he thought, but perhaps she is one of those who have fallen? He had not seen her and somehow he was glad about it.

* * *

The steaming kettle stood on a tree stump at the back of a half-open yard. The tree stump reminded him of a podium. A number of ropes had been strung on various posts around this stage, forming a circle. It seemed to Ranek as if a play were being performed here; the kettle, the server, and his assistant, as well as the men who stood guard duty to prevent anyone from acting out some mad hope—all that was part of the play, perhaps the one whose turn it was and who received his soup also belonged . . . yes, certainly . . . he too . . . while the hungry, watching crowd were the spectators, fascinated and agitated as only spectators can be when a play is well staged, very well staged, so well even, that you identified instantly with everything that appears there.

Now Ranek noticed the woman and the child. They stood to the left of the kettle, among a group apart from the rest; so those were the favoured ones who knew the server.

Ranek placed himself at the back of the kettle. The guards looked at him suspiciously, but because he stayed quiet they did not chase him away. They probably thought he only wanted to inhale the steam and did not begrudge him this cheap pleasure.

He waited for about ten minutes until it was the woman's turn. He noticed how her soup pan was filled to the brim; she exchanged a few words with the server, then took her child by the hand and walked slowly out of the yard. Ranek followed her at some distance. She and the child were walking across the rubble. She did not look back, and he knew what she was looking for—a lonely place where she and the child could eat undisturbed.

* * *

He purposely had not talked to her because he felt that she was much too hungry to negotiate with him at this time. The best thing was to wait until she had eaten; there was plenty of time left then.

It was a warm and beautiful late afternoon, the sun shining low over the rubble-strewn area. Everything glistened and shimmered in the gently flooding reddish light, and the stones and stumps of the burned-down houses displayed the smiling face of forgiveness. You felt as if you were in a cemetery . . . everywhere

wonderful peace . . . you could inhale it, it penetrated as far as your guts.

The woman and the child had sat down on top of a pile of limestone. Both had their backs to him. He walked up very close but they did not see him or know that he stood behind them, watching. There was no one else nearby. He saw the woman eat a few spoonfuls out of the pan and then hand it to the child. The child began to eat, and the woman got up and said to the child, "Mamma has to go behind the bushes. Go ahead and eat. I'll be back soon." Then she left. Not until she had disappeared behind the first low wall did Ranek approach the child.

"Do you still remember me?" he asked, a grin on his face.

The child stopped eating and pressed the bowl anxiously into her lap.

What happened then was something he had not intended at all. Although he knew that the woman was squatting behind the wall relieving herself, and that the child was alone and defenceless at the moment, he had not come here to steal from the child; he just wanted to make a deal with the woman . . . no, certainly he did not want anything else but to complete this deal when he saw the soup within his reach—and he lost all control over himself. He tore the bowl out of the child's hands and gorged down the soup. The child bawled. The woman stuck her head out from behind the wall, but evidently she was in no position to rush to her child's help. It was some time before she appeared. Ranek thought she would leap upon him like a madwoman, but he was wrong. She walked slowly up to him and took the empty bowl out of his hand. Then she grasped the child's hand and said, "God will punish you for that." Then she added, "The child hasn't eaten anything today. Do you have any idea what you've done?"

He wanted to reply, Now I know it. But before, when I did it, I had no idea. I couldn't help it.

But instead he said, "This morning I helped you put your husband back on the bench and you didn't give me anything for that. Now we are quits."

The woman pulled the child away with her. Ranek walked alongside.

"What do you want from me?" the woman asked. "I don't want to have anything more to do with you."

"You don't think that our meeting is purely accidental? I've been looking for you for an hour."

"To steal from me?"

He shook his head, and then he declared, "I have a place to sleep for you and the child." He said once more, "I have a place to sleep . . ."

The woman had suddenly stopped. Her stupefaction was so great she seemed to forget everything that had just happened. "You're making fun of me," she murmured.

"No," he said, and his voice sounded very serious, "I really have something for you." He scratched himself awkwardly under his hat and spat on the ground, then he continued in the same serious tone of voice and in the same slow drawl. "Now you and the child . . . don't need to . . . sleep in the rain any more. You're getting a good room. A real room. A room that has real windows, a window with a cardboard pane. And there's also a real floor there, and a real platform. Your place is the best there is . . . it isn't under, it's right on top of the platform. I've taken care of everything. I'm going to sneak you and the child into this room tonight. You have to believe me."

"You're lying," the woman said, but her eyes did not leave his mouth for one moment. "You're lying," she kept repeating, "you're lying . . . you're lying . . ." and her eyes said, Tell me you're not lying, tell me you're not.

"It was only by accident that I slept in the brothel yard last night," he said, smiling. "I went back to my room today. I have a home. You simply have to believe that I really have a home where I live . . . today someone died in our place . . . in the room in which I live . . . and I thought of you straight away . . . I mean . . . that you and the child would fit on the place . . . the child doesn't take up half as much room as a grownup. You'll both be able to sleep there. Really." He interrupted himself and then he said, "Of course, there's a price."

"How much do you want?" the woman blurted out.

"The wedding ring," Ranek said, smiling, and his voice sounded almost tender now. "Something like that is worth a ring, isn't it?" Now he laughed softly. He knew the woman would not say no.

"That's too much," the woman said—she was gradually regaining control over herself. "I know people who get a place to sleep for a few potatoes, or for cigarettes. Do you have any idea how much that ring is worth?"

"A wedding ring isn't worth much," he said. "It's not a diamond ring, it's just a wedding band."

"The ring is the last thing I have," the woman said. "The war can last many more years. I can't give it away. I can't." And she said, "You're asking too much . . . much too much."

"What does it matter to me whether the wedding ring is the last thing you own," Ranek said, "and even if it is . . . you won't regret exchanging it for the place; a place to sleep is vitally important . . . just as important as eating." And he continued, "There are no firm prices for places to sleep. If you didn't have the child I would say yes, a ring is asking too much. But with the child? Do you think you can find a place for yourself and the child anywhere else? Why don't you try it! And try offering people potatoes. Would they ever tell you off! No, it's impossible the way you imagine. Last year . . . it was still possible to find a place for a whole family, but those times are gone, forever; that's no longer possible today; you know that yourself. There are at least a hundred people waiting for every place that becomes free . . . you know that, don't you?" Ranek caught his breath and thought to himself, You're not a bad salesman, the world has lost a great street vendor in you. A good thing that you frightened her a little. And then he continued, "The place I have for you is rent free. That means: no living expenses. Once you have the place it is yours . . . until you leave the ghetto . . . or until eternity . . . your place, do you understand? And you have no rent to pay; yes, something like that is priceless; I mean, if you don't have to pay rent. Other people would kiss my feet . . . for a place like that, yes. And then . . . don't forget your responsibility

to the child? Or don't you have any? Or would you want to let the child continue sleeping in the open air? And do you know how soon it is going to get cold, autumn isn't very far away any more. What are you going to do then? And in winter? Do you know how many people freeze to death here every winter . . . just because they don't have a place to live?"

"It's still too much," the woman said uncertainly.

"Then I'm sorry," Ranek said, "I have other customers." He pretended that he was about to leave, but the woman held onto him. "Wait!" she said quickly. "Wait . . . don't leave."

He stopped and grabbed her hand and wanted to tear the ring off her finger, but she pushed him away. Her face was chalk-white. "You'll get the ring when we have the place," she said. He agreed to that.

"My husband still hasn't died," the woman said now. "What are we going to do with him?"

"Let's leave him on the bench for the time being."

"That's impossible," the woman said hesitantly, "if only because of the child . . . I could never forgive myself for that . . . one can't simply leave him behind like that."

"Of course you can!" he said.

"Please help me," she said. "Don't you have any idea . . ."

He reflected. "If you had some way we could transport him," he said finally, "then we could put him into our downstairs hallway; it's a good hallway; he can lie there until he dies."

"Then we'll take him along," she said.

"It's high time that we got underway," he said. "It'll soon be night."

"I still have a little change," she said, "just enough to rent two bearers for him."

"All right, but we have to hurry."

"Do you know where one goes to hire bearers?"

"At the undertaker agency," he said.

"Is that far?"

"It's not far from the brothel," he said.

The undertaker agency was locked already. They rattled at the front door and when there was no answer they looked through the display window : a weak light burned in the back of the shop; the owner of the firm was still there; he was in the process of counting the day's receipts; a little boy—his son evidently—stood behind him and watched. When they rattled for the nth time the owner shuffled to the door and opened it. After they had entered and told him what they wanted, the owner explained to them that the bearers had already gone home since it was unusual for them to have customers at such a late hour, and he told them they should come back tomorrow. He was an extremely friendly and zealous person. He asked the woman sympathetically, "Who is it that died?"

"No one," the woman said; "somebody is sick. We're moving and want to take him along."

"Does that have to be today?"

"Absolutely," the woman said.

The man thought for a while and then he suggested that they rent a wheelbarrow. "I have a few in the shop, just in case. That would be less expensive, too."

"Less expensive? Less expensive than the bearers?"

"Yes. Because you'll have to push it yourself. That's always less expensive."

"All right," the woman said, "I'll take the wheelbarrow. I'll bring it back tomorrow."

"That's not necessary," the man said. "I'll send my boy along. He'll bring it back."

"Good," the woman said, "that's very kind of you."

Soon afterwards they left the shop with the wheelbarrow. The little boy went along with them. At first Ranek had been afraid that the door that led to the brothel back yard would be too narrow for the wheelbarrow to pass through, but it was just wide enough after all. The woman pushed the wheelbarrow up to the bench, Ranek pulled the motionless body inside it, placing him so that the body and head lay flat on the bottom of the cart while the legs, which were a little too long, dangled out at the back. Then they got underway.

They were lucky. They met Max and Lea at the corner of the Pushkinskaja. The two had moved in that morning but had come back into town once more to buy bread, and now they were walking home; as the old railway station lay in the same direction as the sanctuary Max and Lea joined them and helped them push the wheelbarrow. Little Stella and the boy were walking a little way ahead and were talking excitedly with each other.

There was no trace left of yesterday's rain. The street was dry and dusty again. The wheelbarrow hop-skipped across the hard ruts and ridges of the dirt road and shook the dying man against the side-boards like a sack of potatoes.

They were almost halfway to the sanctuary when Max suddenly stopped and said he did not have that much time to waste.

"Help us just a little bit more," the woman begged him. "I'll always be thankful to you if you do."

"It's too late," Max said. "We're expected." He took his girl friend by the arm and said, "Come on, Lea."

"You really helped us a great deal," Ranek said.

"Why not," Max said. "I like to help as long as I can."

"That was really very decent of you," Ranek said.

"You can visit us some time," Lea said, smiling. "Right, Max? Have them come over sometime. He lives practically right next door."

"I'll be glad to," Ranek said. "The old railway station is only a stone's throw from our place."

"If you ever want to barter something for food," Max said,

"I'll always be glad to be of service to you; our railway truck is easy to find; after all, there are only two of them."

"Or if you feel like playing poker," Lea said, "for potato peels."

Max and Lea laughed and then they left. They turned around once more at a distance and waved to them.

Dusk had set in rapidly and now filled the street. The night was impatient, it came unexpectedly and breathlessly. Max and Lea had long since become invisible, and the two children, too, had been swallowed up by the dusk. The woman called out loudly, "Stella . . . Stella . . . where are you? Stella!"

There was an answer from far away.

"Come back!" the woman shouted into the dusk. "Come back!"

"We've over exerted ourselves," said Ranek. "We wouldn't even have made it this far without Max and Lea."

"What are we going to do now?"

"I don't have the strength to push the wheelbarrow all the way home," Ranek said. "I'm already dizzy."

"What shall we do?"

"We'll leave your husband here," Ranek said.

"No!" the woman said. "No!"

The boy and little Stella reappeared. They were holding hands and giggling merrily.

The woman suddenly took the ring off her finger and gave it to Ranek. "We can't stop now," she said.

Ranek took the ring and grinned. "I could take off now," he said. "I could leave the three of you sitting high and dry."

The woman tried to smile. "I wasn't going to give you the ring until we had our place," she said, "but you know, I trust you."

"In spite of the soup?" Ranek grinned.

The woman nodded. "Yes, in spite of the soup," she said.

"That's good," Ranek said.

"You were hungry," the woman said, "and that's why you didn't think of what a sin it was to take the soup away from the child, but in spite of that you're not a bad man; you don't look like one."

Ranek laughed.

"I know you won't let us down," the woman said anxiously.

"You put that very nicely," Ranek said. "I like hearing things like that." And he thought to himself, She's really hard-boiled. She's just trying to get you to do it; she can't possibly believe a single word of what she just said.

"All right, then," he said, smiling. "Let's give it another try, perhaps we'll manage after all."

They started to push the wheelbarrow again. The children now walked alongside. The boy said, "If my father had known how far it is, he wouldn't have sent me along. He made a point of telling me to be home before dark."

Ranek suddenly stopped and bent down over the man in the wheelbarrow.

"What's the matter?" the woman asked, startled.

"But he's dead!" Ranek exclaimed. "And we didn't even notice, he must have died quite a long time ago."

"Are we going to toss him out?" the boy asked impatiently.

"The best thing is that we put him in the ditch," Ranek said.

"In that case I can turn back," the boy said.

9

Ranek hid the woman and the child in the bushes behind the house. There they waited until everyone in the house had lain down to sleep; only then he signalled them to follow him.

There was no one in the hallway. Muffled noises seeped out of the room upstairs. He led the woman and child to the stairs and ordered them to squat down in the hollow.

The woman seemed completely changed since the man in the wheelbarrow had died, even though she'd known all along that it was only a question of time. There was no understanding it, he thought, shaking his head. She had been sobbing the whole time and there was no calming her down. Before, on the street, she had made a scene. She had simply refused to comprehend

that the man had died, and insisted on taking him along. Ranek had tried any number of things to convince her that he was really dead. He had taken the dead man out of the wheelbarrow and given him a healthy kick. Then he had slapped him in the face, and as the woman still refused to believe him, he had taken out his pocketknife and made a small incision in the dead man's skin. Only then she had understood.

One shouldn't go to so much trouble over a lousy lot like that, he thought. Others would be much tougher, they wouldn't have wasted as much time as he did; and then . . . you still try doing the decent thing . . . but what good does it do you? He hadn't simply made off with the ring. He had kept his promise and after he had sent the boy with the wheelbarrow home he had undressed the dead man and given his clothes to the woman, because they were legally hers. The woman was right : he deserved her trust.

Now he said to her, "Why don't you stop your bawling, damn it! The whole plan will fall through if somebody notices that I've brought two people with me. I'm going upstairs now to reconnoitre. Stay under the stairs for the time being, and don't move, understand! It's just a precautionary measure."

He was about to leave when he had second thoughts—the woman still hadn't quieted down. "I told you you're supposed to keep quiet!" he snarled at her. "What's the matter with you, anyway? The people are going to find out. Stop it! Stop your bawling now!" He grabbed her furiously by the hair. "Well, now, are you going to or not, damn it!" And then he gave her a sharp slap in the face. That helped. "You don't deserve anything better," he hissed, "an unthankful rabble, that's what you are."

He shuffled off up the stairs. No light fell through the cracks in the door. It's dark in the room, he thought . . . that's good . . . that is very good . . . but they haven't all fallen asleep yet, no, certainly not; you're going to have to be careful . . . better wait a little longer. You'll bring the woman and the brat upstairs when everyone is asleep, not until then. That way you avoid all sorts of unnecessary quarrels and in the morning they are confronted with a *fait accompli*.

He stopped halfway up the stairs because the woman had

started whimpering again. This whimpering got on his nerves. He went back downstairs and beat his clenched fist on the woman's head until she became quiet under the staircase. It's a miracle that the child is so well behaved, he thought; usually children bawl much more loudly and with far less restraint than grown-ups; the child must be even more afraid of him than her mother, he concluded. He shrugged his shoulders and shuffled off.

* * *

He had not gone inside. He cowered in front of the door, lying in wait. People were still talking inside. There were still people awake. After a while the light was turned back on and shortly after he heard steps softly approaching the door.

Then the door opened. Seidel stood on the threshold with the lamp in one hand and was lighting the way for the businessman's wife. The two paid him no attention. The woman's face looked distraught. Seidel said something to her, but she did not give him a real answer. Seidel grinned and went back into the room. The woman groped her way down the stairs. Ranek listened closely. He knew that the corpse of the businessman lay downstairs in the hallway. Seidel had dragged it there after supper. Would the woman stop near the corpse? It's her husband, he thought, why shouldn't she stop? But she did not; the rhythm of her steps did not change for one second. She walked past the corpse.

Ranek waited.

Seidel had left a crack open in the door. Ranek could see out of the darkness of the landing how Seidel sat back down on the platform, placed the burning lamp between his legs and kept staring expectantly at the door. He's waiting for the woman, Ranek thought.

The woman returned shortly from the latrine. She stepped back into the room. She too forgot to close the door. Ranek saw her trudge towards the platform. When she was close enough Seidel suddenly bent forward, grabbed her nightshirt, pulled her

closer to him, seized her around the waist, and lifted her up to the platform with him.

Ranek laughed softly to himself. Poor old Axelrad, he thought, poor old slob. Always had such a high opinion of himself because such an unprepossessing, weak man as he had managed to get from the floor to the platform and had asserted his place up there despite all the objections people had raised. But he had not been quite farsighted enough. No, Ranek thought with a smirk on his face, he hadn't been sufficiently farsighted. Didn't see in advance that Seidel, his neighbour on the platform, would automatically come to lie next to his wife once he was dead.

Ranek knew that Seidel didn't give a damn what his three sons thought of him and that he would try to have the woman although her husband's corpse had just been taken downstairs.

Someone in the room gave the door a kick; it slammed shut with a bang. That must have been Red; he can't stand it if the door stays open too long. Ranek leaned comfortably against the bannister. He had time enough now, and he had to wait anyway. His eyes fell shut. He started to nap and when he awakened again it was well into the night and everyone was sleeping in the room.

Ranek stepped softly inside. Seidel had put the lamp back on the window sill. Ranek got it now because he wanted to make sure of which was the best place for the woman and the child.

Ranek inched up to the businessman's place. He was very careful not to wake anyone, holding the lamp very high. The businessman's wife was lying in Seidel's embrace. Both of them were fast asleep. The woman's face resembled risen dough; she was breathing through her mouth and it sounded like a death rattle. Seidel was grinning in his sleep, or at least it looked that way to Ranek because a dead cigarette butt was stuck between his lips contorting his mouth. Some ashes had dropped on his chest.

Ranek took the butt out of Seidel's mouth; he did this very carefully, without touching Seidel... this was not the first time he had done this. He felt like lighting the butt right away—at the hot lamp shade—but he controlled himself and stuck it into his

pocket. He was having second thoughts while he was silently watching the couple. Seidel was lying in the dead man's spot, therefore Stella and her mother could hardly fit into the same space. They had to lie down in Seidel's former spot. But a change in the sleeping arrangements might have unpleasant consequences because Seidel's three boys, who lay right next to him, would make a stink in the morning if they suddenly discovered a strange woman and a strange child in their father's place; besides, it was important that the two lie down exactly in the dead man's place, so that their moving into this room would be made legal. The best thing would be to separate Seidel from the businessman's wife, roll him back on his old place . . . and to stick the woman and Stella in between.

* * *

He got the woman and child. Both of them were trembling with fear and he had to drag them up the stairs.

When he had finally got them into the room and again illumined the platform with the lamp he saw that the businessman's wife had awakened. But oddly enough she seemed to notice neither Ranek nor the woman, nor the child. She was staring fixedly at Seidel with a mute, expressionless face. Ranek had no choice but to speak to her softly.

He said to her: "Two new ones," but she didn't hear him. Not until he had gently shaken her did she come halfway out of her trance. "Two new ones," Ranek said once more. He explained to her briefly that he wanted to put the two, the woman and the child, on the businessman's old place and why he had to push Seidel away from her. She listened to everything he said, nodded silently, but did not look at him, and he had the feeling she hadn't understood anything he said. She made no objections when he pulled the sleeping Seidel carefully to the side. Now finally she looked up, directly into his face, but she was regarding him as a sleepwalker might an object that he doesn't recognize. He shuddered. She's still half dazed from the shock, he thought; probably she doesn't even know that she slept with Seidel, and she has no idea of what's happening now.

Ranek lifted little Stella up to her new place. The woman climbed after her. "Good night," he whispered, "and don't worry about anything. Everything will be all right now."

Then he went to the window, put down the lamp, and extinguished it.

IO

He felt more optimistic again since he had sold the ring at a favourable price on the black market. He now felt like someone who had been mired in quicksand but had suddenly got free again. Although the possibility of dying of hunger was not as remote as he would have liked it to be, it would not have been sensible to keep thinking of this possibility at this time. Who knew what the future would bring?

Ranek had got hard cash for the ring. He used one half of the money for buying foodstuffs: two sackfuls of potatoes and a third sack containing a mixture of soybeans and millet. In order to conserve space he had attached a few heavy iron hooks above his place and hung the sacks on them. The remaining share of the money he carried on his person; he had punched a hole through the bills and run a piece of twine through the holes and wound the twine around his midriff; that way he couldn't lose the money and it couldn't be stolen from him. It was always wise to be careful. Now he could sleep with his mind at peace.

Today he cooked potatoes for himself. He had made a point of standing on the other side of the stove, next to the door, so that he could keep an eye on the sacks by the window. A few people had formed a half-circle around the stove and inhaled the smell; their eyes were aglow, but they did not dare come too close to his pot.

The potatoes still weren't soft though they had been cooking a long time. They were an unusual sort anyway, as hard as

nuts, but that's why he had got them cheap. Ranek felt at peace with the world and was whistling merrily—an old Yiddish song, whose words he had forgotten.

* * *

Ranek was still standing by the stove when Sigi came into the room. Ranek knew that Sigi had left the house early in the morning but he had no idea where he had been. Sigi sniffed around the stove for a while, then he said abruptly, "I'm just back from the soup kitchen."

"I see," Ranek replied indifferently, "that's very interesting."

"I saw your sister-in-law," Sigi said, screwing up his eyes.

Ranek was just about to start whistling again, the same song he had been whistling all along, but suddenly it seemed as if he had no breath left. "Is she still there?" he asked softly, and looked past Sigi.

"She's still there," Sigi said very slowly. "She collapsed . . . she's no longer moving."

Sigi grinned, gloating over the shock he had given Ranek. His eyes had become even smaller; they were glistening with harmless enjoyment now: two bright, glowing slits in the emaciated, chalk-coloured face. "She doesn't move at all any more," he repeated, and while he said this he stretched out his thin arms . . . towards the flame that hissed out from under the pot, and then he slowly turned his hands palms-up.

"What . . . what happened?" Ranek stuttered.

"Nothing yet," Sigi said, "she isn't dead yet . . . calm down."

"What happened?"

"She was standing in line . . . at the damned soup kitchen. Couldn't stand up any longer. Fell right over. Gone she was."

"Have you really just come from there?"

"Yes."

"You're not lying?"

"No lie."

"Not dead, you say?"

"Just unconscious," Sigi grinned.

"Listen," Ranek's voice snapped. "Do me a favour. I'll give you a potato for it. Bring Deborah here. But quickly, you understand! I can't leave here now, otherwise the bastards will steal everything I have."

Sigi threw a brief glance at the steaming potato pot and then at the horde behind the stove.

"You can't leave, that's true. Will you give me more? Because you can't leave just now. Three potatoes?"

"All right," Ranek said, "three it is. Now go on! Don't lose any time!"

"I want one now," Sigi said in a businesslike tone of voice. "You can give me the others later on."

"And what if you just take off?"

"I won't."

You s.o.b., thought Ranek, furious, if you don't return, you s.o.b. . . . and if you don't bring her here . . . you lazy s.o.b. But he knew that he couldn't lose his temper now because he needed Sigi.

"The potatoes aren't soft yet," he said, controlling his voice. "They have to cook a while longer. Listen, later on they'll be as soft as butter. You won't even need to chew them . . . they'll digest all by themselves . . . first class, I'm telling you, first class. I'll give it to you later . . . my word of honour. First bring Deborah."

"First the potato," Sigi said obstinately. "Don't misunderstand me. Of course, I trust you. But safe is safe. It's a principle."

"As you wish, you asshole." Ranek fumbled angrily around in the pot and fished a potato out of the hot water and gave it to Sigi. Sigi let it vanish in his pocket. "Of course I won't be able to carry Deborah."

"No need to," Ranek said. "She'll have come to by the time you get to the kitchen. Help her walk a little that's all I want from you. And tell her I have some food for her; that'll help. Do you understand what I mean?"

Sigi nodded. Then he trudged off.

I I

Sigi had finally brought Deborah home. He tore the door open. His face was covered with sweat from the exertion. He gasped. "She's downstairs in the hallway. She can't walk upstairs."

Ranek moved hastily toward the door, but then he stopped suddenly. He remembered that the people behind the stove were just waiting for him to leave the room for a few moments.

"Bring her up!" he cursed. "Drag her upstairs, but bring her up!"

"I want to have the two potatoes now," Sigi blurted out.

"Here! Put them in your pocket. And get going now. Bring her up!"

Sigi disappeared again and Ranek heard him clumping downstairs.

* * *

A little later, when Deborah tottered into the room, supported by Sigi, Ranek took her gently into his arms. Her whole body was trembling. She leaned on him, a person without a will of her own who was very tired and who suddenly wanted nothing more than a little bit of protection and a little warmth . . . and something to eat. He held her for a while like that, gently yet firmly, and it seemed to him as if he should hold her like that forever and as if he was not allowed to let go of her again. But she said not a word. Then he helped her sit down on the floor in front of the stove, and he handed her the potato pot, and still she didn't say anything. She clasped the pot with trembling

hands and started to eat. She emptied the whole pot and then clawed away at the edges.

Sigi had gone back out again. It's good that he isn't here now, Ranek thought. He leaned against the stove and did not take his eyes off Deborah. Her face was completely changed at this moment; it showed nothing except animal hunger, and suddenly it was not Deborah's face any more; it was a strange face that he no longer recognized, but now it fitted into these surroundings.

When she was finished he asked, "Do you feel better?"

She nodded.

"Not angry any longer?" he asked.

She shook her head. She looked at him, and all he could see in her eyes was a great weariness. She tried to get up but she couldn't do it. "My legs," she whispered, startled, "I can't . . . I can't . . . why don't you help me, Ranek!"

"That'll pass," he said, smiling. "It's just that you're so weak now. Just wait until you've started digesting the grub."

"Help me get up," she begged him again.

"No," he said, "you'll stay where you are." He spoke to her as to a child. "You're going to rest now. Stay where you are."

He busied himself at the stove although the fire had gone out long ago, because he suddenly felt embarrassed and did not want her to see it. Then he went outside.

When he came back after a while she was still sitting there, staring into the pot. He squatted down beside her. He took the pot cautiously out of her hands and put it on the floor. One of the men standing around the stove grabbed the pot and rushed off. Ranek wanted to rush after him, but she held him back. "Don't do anything to him," she said, "the pot's empty."

"If you say so," he said hoarsely, "then I won't do anything to him." He now wanted to say to her. Deborah, everything is all right again. Don't worry. As long as I have something to eat there'll be something for you too. We'll share everything. But the words wouldn't come. "I need someone to watch the food, when I'm not at home," he said. "I can't leave this place at all otherwise. Will you do that for me?"

"Yes," she said, "you know that I'll do that for you."

"You can have grub for that," he said. "It's worth it to me. I've been robbed once and I don't want it to happen again." He grinned stiffly, showing her the black stumps of his teeth.

"Why don't you tell me the truth?" she asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Why don't you simply tell me that you want to help me? Why so roundabout? Or are you ashamed? That isn't anything to be ashamed of."

"Don't talk nonsense! You know very well that I don't do anything without calculation. You ought to know me well enough by now to know that." He thought, What a nice mess you've made now. She's going to become sentimental in the end.

He helped her get up now, led her to her place, took off his jacket, and covered her with it. "You are very sweet," she said, "Very sweet."

"Is there something else you want? I can cook something else."

She shook her head, and now an almost imperceptible smile crawled over her lips. "No," she said, "I don't want anything else. Tomorrow is another day. Let's not lose our heads."

"The two of us?"

"Yes, the two of us," she said softly.

She watched him quietly. A butt was stuck behind his ear; he took it now and put it between his lips.

"Stolen," he said, grinning. "This is a good brand." He laughed, coughing at the same time; yet, his eyes looked bitter. There's something else he wants to say to you, she thought, and he doesn't know how to begin.

"Do you have a match?"

She said no.

"It doesn't matter," he said, and he took one out of his pocket and lit the butt. He scratched himself awkwardly. Then he said, "There's something else I wanted to ask you . . . it has to do with Fred. You know . . . the tooth business."

"I knew you wanted to speak about that."

He squatted down beside her again. "I often asked myself if it was only because of the tooth." He cleared his throat, then he continued, "Ranek, I kept saying to myself, Deborah is bound to

realize that it is right for the living to inherit what the dead leave behind. So she can't reproach you for that. Perhaps it was a sin, that business with the tooth...most of all because he hadn't been dead very long and because you did it right away, but nowadays one has to cut corners. You inherit what you can and how you can. One has no choice. That's the way it is. And Deborah knows that. And that's why she can't reproach you for anything."

"I didn't reproach you, Ranek." Deborah shook her head. She stared reflectively at her folded hands. "I didn't reproach you," she said once more, quietly, "because I knew you weren't guilty. You did it because you were desperate and because you believed we could live from the tooth, at least for a while. You did it for both of us. And you know, I often told myself: Fred has forgiven him too. It must be that way. The dead forgive the hungry, and they forgive those in despair."

"Why didn't you say something to me...during all those weeks? Why, Deborah?" he asked, even though he knew why and had known all along.

"Because I couldn't," she said, sitting up halfway, the jacket falling from her lap; she leaned against the wall, looking at him with large, half-open eyes. "I was afraid. Not of you, Ranek. Only of the memory. Perhaps that sounds stupid. But that's the way it was. I relived the scene in the hallway time and again. Relived it time and again when you came near me."

The scene in the hallway, he thought, the night and the horror...Fred's death mask, which had been like wax in the light of the kerosene lamp...and you...how you hit him...with the hammer...on his silent mouth.

"We're all haunted by ghosts, Deborah."

"It was his face more than anything else, his horribly disfigured bloody face. I kept seeing it whenever I looked at you."

"And now?" he asked.

"Not any more," she said. "Only at first was it really bad."

"Can you look me in the eyes now without being frightened?" he asked, trying to be funny, but he noticed that it had a false sound and his voice remained serious and weighty.

"Yes, Ranek," she said gently, "you know things like that pass away with time; one calms down; if that weren't so, it would be a sign that one is sick."

"You mean, one is mad?"

She smiled weakly.

"You're not mad," he said. He crushed the butt on the floor and scraped it away with his foot. It's all right again, he thought, everything is all right again.

"We shouldn't forget the dead," she said softly, "but we shouldn't go on living with them, either. We don't have that right. Don't you think so?"

"We shouldn't. That's right." He got up. "You're chalk-white," he said. "Sleep a little. Sleeping is always good."

She cuddled up again on the floor and drew the jacket over herself. "It's much too early still to go to sleep," she murmured.

"You can sleep for an hour," he said, smiling, "then you'll get up and we'll sit down by the window."

"All right," she said, "if you insist."

I 2

It was a quiet night again. Only once a single shot resounded from the direction of the Dniester, but it sounded thin and remote.

Deborah smoked one of Ranek's cigarettes; it was freshly cut tobacco that Ranek had traded for a handful of millet. She was lying quietly on her place. Every so often she saw someone step up to the window, peer out into the dark yard, and then lie back down again, reassured. The heat kept most of the people in the room awake. There was a constant movement on the floor; it was like the body of a snake in a container that was too small for it, a movement that neither steered backward nor forward

but that gathered itself together like a wave only to crawl back into itself again afterward.

She was lying there quietly, and she was thinking of Ranek . . . You slept one hour in the afternoon because Ranek had wanted it. And when you awoke he sat by your side like someone who had to guard the sleep of another person. And you were very glad about that. Yes, more than glad. You were happy. You suddenly knew that you were no longer alone.

Now she stared with great effort at the window black with night. Was Ranek asleep? Perhaps he was tossing restlessly back and forth?

It is good the nights are not so long any more. Tomorrow morning, she thought, tomorrow you'll trade a few potatoes for corn and onions. You'll make corn-meal mush and let it harden and then cut it into large slices and fry them with onions. He certainly can't have eaten that for a long time. And there's no doubt he'll like it.

She closed her eyes and lay there quietly, thinking about the things he liked, and she thought of other delicacies she would prepare for him from now on, and she was overcome by an oddly piquant joy.

* * *

She heard a soft groan near her and sat up. She peered into the dark at the woman lying next to her. She knew the woman had strikingly long hair which fell like a filthy, waving coat over her shoulders, and that the people called her the long-haired one for simplicity's sake. A short while ago she had been chased from her place on the platform, and now she slept beside Deborah.

Another groan. No, that didn't come from the woman. Suddenly she knew who it was: the half-dead man at her feet. He had been lying in his place for several days now without being able to die.

She lay back down again. Don't think about it. Just don't think about it . . . tomorrow you'll cook Ranek some corn . . . and you'll fry some onions for him.

* * *

It was the following day, around noon. Deborah was leaning against the window. Down in the yard, near the latrine, stood Daniel, the policeman, toying with the long-haired one. A lot of people stood around the two, but this did not seem to trouble Daniel.

Deborah shoved the cardboard pane a little farther in front of the window; she did not want to be seen. Briefly she thought of her first meeting with Daniel in the Prokov ghetto. It was a few months ago. He had visited her and she remembered how he had said to her, "Really, Deborah, I almost dropped when Ranek told me that you were here." He had offered her his hand, but she—she had just stared at him. And then he had said, "Why won't you shake my hand? Because of this thing?" And he had pointed to his white armlet with the police insignia.

Ranek had reproached her afterwards. "You can't afford to do something like that to Daniel. Something like that could mean the end of us. And don't forget . . . we need him; he helped me out of a tight spot once before."

Daniel had been coming more often into this area recently, to pick up some woman either out of the sanctuary or out of the bushes. He probably had his fill of the brothel. In any case, these women were cheaper and you could have more fun with them.

The noise in front of the latrine downstairs increased. More and more people joined the circle that had formed around Daniel and the long-haired one; a few men were wolf-whistling and the female contingent gabbed excitedly with each other, and some screeched voluptuously like young girls at the unexpected sight of a naked man. Deborah could see how Daniel tried to drag the woman away with him, but the woman fought back and tried to elude him. Finally Daniel used his old trick. He took a piece of bread out of his pocket and waved it mockingly back and forth. The trick worked. The hungry woman went for it as if she was mad, repeatedly, but without success, and then broke out into hysterical screams.

Shortly afterwards the two of them went to the back of the house. Daniel walked in front, waving the slice of bread above his head, the woman staggered after him. He'll screw her at the

back of the house, Deborah thought wearily; the woman will be grateful for the bread, and Daniel will think that he's doing good by giving it to her.

After a while they came back. The policeman dragged the woman by her arms to the latrine and ordered her, accompanied by the screams of the crowd, to squat down there.

Deborah suddenly stepped away from the window. The nausea was so great, so overwhelming, she felt she would choke if she watched any longer.

13

This afternoon the fat man was the only customer. As usual, the barber talked politics with him while he worked away at the fat cheeks with his shaving brush. The apprentice, his hair as slick as usual, stood lazily about the shop. As the barber's flow of words became more and more rapid and because the boy knew that the barber had forgotten his presence entirely at the moment, he used the opportunity to slip out of the shop.

He walked across the crowded street and entered the back yard of the brothel. The cigarette boy was not there. The apprentice had to tell him something. It was something important. He had wanted to look for him in the morning, but there had been too much to do in the shop. You'll find him, the apprentice thought; he'll be roaming around here somewhere with Ljuba; they're probably both standing at the corner up the street again.

He ran hurriedly along the Pushkinskaja. He ran along the middle of the road, his quick eyes darting from one side of the street to the other. He was completely out of breath by the time he discovered the cigarette boy and his sister.

The cigarette boy had already seen the apprentice, who was waving frantically. "He must have news for us," the boy said to the little girl. "Hold the box for a moment."

The little one took the box into her awkward hands. "I'll take care of everything with him," the boy said quickly. "Try selling some more in the meantime, we haven't taken in much today."

He quickly took off his jacket. "Put the jacket around your shoulders and hide the box under it. Do as I do . . . and keep your eyes out for the police."

The little one nodded and while her brother walked toward the apprentice she whispered the phrases she knew by heart to the passersby: "Cigarettes . . . cigarettes . . . do you want cigarettes? We exchange . . . we sell . . . bread or money . . . as you wish . . . cigarettes . . . cigarettes . . . Russian . . . Rumanian . . . German . . ."

The apprentice whispered with her brother for quite a while. Her brother had placed his arm in comradely fashion around the shoulders of the apprentice and listened carefully to what he had to report, nodding all the while with his small, pointed head. After a time the two ambled up to her.

"Listen, Ljuba," her brother said importantly, "we have news for you." He tautened his sunken chest and pointed to the apprentice. "He has a place for us, a real sleeping place."

"Really?" the little one said, beaming.

The apprentice nodded patronizingly. "You won't have to sleep on the cellar stairs any more from now on."

He added, "That's nothing for little girls, a brothel, right?"

Ljuba nodded. She agreed with everything as long as the older boys were for it.

"There's a chance we might get into a real room," her brother said.

"I want two cigarettes for the tip," the apprentice said.

"All right, you'll get them as soon as we have the place." The cigarette boy turned to his sister. "It isn't all set yet, just a tip so far."

"A tip," the little girl repeated with a smile. She liked the word. It pleased her and she repeated it: "A tip . . . a tip . . ."

"You know Stella, don't you?"

"Of course," Ljuba said, "we always used to play together. Stella isn't there any more."

"Yes, you used to play in front of the cellar, and she's no longer there. Her parents aren't there any more either."

"Does that have something to do with the tip?"

"Yes, that's just it. It has a great deal to do with it."

Her brother grinned and now said to the apprentice, "And how it has to do with it, doesn't it?"

"And how," the apprentice said.

"All of us wondered why Stella and her mother disappeared," the cigarette boy said. "Now I know why. They moved and I know where they moved to." He made a significant pause, and then went on, "do you remember the man who moved the dead man away from the front of the barber shop a few days ago?"

"With my help," the apprentice interjected.

"With your help, of course," the cigarette boy said. "You remember, Ljuba, we were there and watched. The man also slept a night in the brothel yard; you'll be able to remember that too and besides we've met him quite a few times on the street, a funny fellow with a big hat and holes in his trousers where his arse looks through."

"Yes, I know who you mean," the little one said.

"The fellow got a place for Stella and her mother." He pointed to the apprentice. "He heard about it."

"Only for Stella and her mother?" the little one asked.

"Her father croaked while they were moving," the boy said. "It was high time, too."

Ljuba now asked the apprentice, "Is this just a story or is this the truth?"

"Of course it's true," the apprentice said, "or do you think we're telling fairy tales? We have no time for that."

"How did you happen to find all that out?"

"I already told your brother," the apprentice answered.

"Go ahead, tell it once more," the cigarette boy said, "you can do it better than I can."

"All right." The apprentice conceitedly stroked his hand over his slicked-up hair and looked pompous. "Very simple," he said, smirking. "The man stuck the barber with an old beat-up compact recently. A real sharpie, I'm telling you. He came again

this morning, boasting he only traded with sleeping places now; said he was earning fabulous amounts that way, and then he asked the barber if he didn't have a customer for him, someone with a lot of loot, because tonight something was becoming free again where he lives. The barber first didn't want to believe him, but then he told the barber the story about Stella and her parents, and of course he boasted again until the barber realized it was really true. Really began to respect him, he did, the barber; he said sometimes you misjudge people, but you are really somebody. I was there and heard everything. The man described exactly what Stella and her mother looked like. It's no mistake, I'm positive. And then he gave the barber his name and address and asked him once more to send someone to him tonight."

The apprentice interrupted his flow of words. Then he suddenly said cautiously, as if it were a secret: "The fellow lives in the sanctuary . . . and his name is Ranek."

"Ranek," the little one whispered. "Ranek . . . the sanctuary."

"Don't you think the barber has sent someone to him already?" the cigarette boy asked.

"Not yet," the apprentice said.

The cigarette boy contracted his small, prematurely old brow into little wrinkles. "You know," he said to the apprentice, "if I had known that the fellow could get you a place to sleep I could have found out his name and address without your help. All I would have had to was ask the old hunchback; she knows him well."

"But you didn't," the apprentice said spitefully. "No dirty tricks now."

"It's all right, you'll get your cigarettes, a promise is a promise."

"Ranek is a real sharp one," the apprentice assured him once again. "You can depend on it. He'll find you a place to sleep."

* * *

The half-dead man near Deborah's place, who had still groaned last night, had been lying there for several hours now without

making any sound at all. He was staring at the empty clothes looks on the wall, and it looked as if he were just drowning. He had died shortly after midday, but no one had noticed it.

Only now, towards evening, as Seidel's boys were tickling the silent man's naked feet did people realize that he was dead.

This was not the first time the boys had had their fun with him, more out of an impulse of childish affection than cruelty, for they were glad each time he twitched his feet or whimpered softly, since that was a sign of life. Now, as the boys noticed that the man's condition was not what it used to be, they squatted down beside the dead man. At a loss what to do next, they touched his chest and put their ears to it.

Then the children were pushed away by the crowd that had assembled around the stiff in the meantime.

"Oh my God," a woman's voice said sympathetically, "he slept next to my legs last night."

"Next to Deborah's legs," Ranek said.

"Next to mine too," the long-haired one said, smiling. "I sleep next to Deborah, or didn't you know that?"

"Who's going to carry the corpse out?" someone in the crowd shouted.

No one replied.

"Who's going to carry him out?"

The crowd pushed to the door. Ranek was shoved. He stumbled over the corpse and fell. When he got up again he was alone with the dead man. They certainly take off fast, he thought angrily; everyone wants to have a look at him but no one wants to carry him out. Simply make themselves scarce, the lazy lot. Now he remembered again that Deborah's place was next to the dead man's. I have to get him out of here, he thought, I've got to get him out. Deborah shouldn't sleep next to a corpse, no she shouldn't, she shouldn't. So you'll just have to do it by yourself.

He took a piece of rope out of his pocket and tied the man's legs together. The end of the rope he made into a sling. It was good that way; it would not be as difficult now; at least one didn't have to bend down. While he was dragging the dead man to the door, he heard loud slapping sounds coming from the hall-

way . . . someone began to howl . . . a hoarse child's voice. Damn it! Who's being beaten? What's the matter now?

A little boy rushed up to him on the stairway, almost knocking him over. The boy clutched onto him and hid his bleeding face in Ranek's jacket. "He hit me," the boy sobbed, "he hit me," and he pointed to Red, who stood laughing by the bannister.

Ranek had recognized the boy at once. "What are you doing here?" he asked, surprised.

"Claims he's looking for someone," Red said now. "Of course it's a lie. Just wanted to sneak in here." And Red was about to lunge at the boy again. Ranek restrained him. "Let him be. I know him. That's the cigarette boy from the Pushkinskaja." And to the boy: "Who are you looking for, eh?"

"I wanted to talk to you," the boy said; "the barber's apprentice sent me."

Ranek had dropped the dead man. His hands stroked the boy's curly head, and then he looked down the stairs and recognized the little girl with the dark, gentle eyes; she was standing at the entrance and was looking up at him.

"What is your sister doing here?"

"She always comes with me, wherever I go," the boy said.

Ranek spoke softly to him now. "Red won't do anything to you. It's all right now. Just stay here and wait until I'm back. I just want to get the corpse downstairs. Wait here."

* * *

Ranek went with the boy to the entrance. No one was there except the girl.

"The apprentice told me that you sell sleeping places," the boy said. "We need one . . . Ijuba and I."

Ranek nodded. "You're lucky, someone just croaked," he said. "You can have the place. I'll protect you. Red won't do anything to you from now on, nor will the others."

"You're not just anybody here, right?"

"Right," Ranek said.

"Is the place big enough for both of us?"

"Big enough," Ranek said, "big enough for you two."

"How much do you want for it?"

"Twenty cigarettes, of the Rumanian kind."

"Ten," the boy said, "of the Rumanian kind."

Ranek shook his head. "Lots of people have real money to spend for a place to sleep and still can't get one," he said insistently. "Look"—he put his mouth to the boy's ear—"not long ago a woman gave me a ring, a golden wedding ring."

"So you cheated the woman," the boy said—he had pulled himself together in the meantime and had got over his beating.

"You're a clever boy," Ranek laughed, "but this time you fooled yourself. It wasn't even necessary to cheat the woman. She urged me to take the ring. Well, what do you say now? She pressed it on me."

"Then you must have blackmailed her," the boy said precociously.

Ranek looked at him with a mixture of astonishment and fright.

"You know too much for your age," he said slowly.

"Ten cigarettes," the boy said.

Ranek reflected.

"It isn't even your place," the boy said. "I'm just giving the cigarettes to you so that you put in a word for us."

Ranek laughed again. "Because it's you," he said, "I'll make it ten cigarettes." And he thought to himself, Take ten now, you can get the rest of the cigarettes from him later on, during the night.

"Thank you very much," the boy said.

"Let's have them," Ranek said.

"I'll give you five now," the boy said. "I'll give you the rest later on after everything is settled."

Damn it, Ranek thought, that tricky little brat can outwit every one of us. Well, you just wait, you'll be surprised when you wake up tomorrow and discover that all your goods are gone.

"Fine, let's have them, five in the meantime."

The boy handed him the cigarettes. "I still owe the apprentice two for the tip," he said.

"Is he your friend?"

"Yes, has been for a long time."

"He's the other way around," Ranek said, grinning. "You know what that is?"

The boy shook his head. Then it dawned on him. "Oh, I see . . . if that's what you mean; no, he isn't; he just sleeps with the barber because he wants to eat."

"Yes," Ranek said, "he has to eat; you're right actually."

The boy drew him a little farther into the hallway. "We shouldn't talk so loudly in front of Ljuba," he whispered. "She's still innocent. She doesn't know anything at all."

"You mean she doesn't know life yet?"

"I look after her," the boy said, and his voice suddenly turned hard.

"Yes, you do a good job of looking after her," Ranek said. "You're a good boy."

He placed his bony arms around the boy's shoulders and then he led him slowly back to the entrance, where the little girl was waiting patiently.

"Come, Ljubitshka," the boy said. "Everything is all set."

The child came up timidly. She looked at Ranek. "Can we really stay here?"

"Yes," Ranek said with a smile. "You can really stay here."

Part Four

I

The news that Ranek was dead left the people in the sanctuary absolutely cold. His close acquaintances shrugged their shoulders; he was just another somebody who disappears from the scene sooner or later, and the best thing was to forget the matter as quickly as possible. Most of the people, however, had hardly known Ranek; as far as they were concerned Ranek was somebody without a name, somebody who used to live here. Some people could only remember his old battered hat, which he used to keep on even inside the room, as if he had been afraid to loose it somewhere; a few others, however, whose imaginations were above average, were still capable of creating a human figure to fit their dim memory of the hat. So they pictured him to themselves as being long-legged, with a small head and an eagle nose; others, again, saw him with short legs, a melon-sized head, and a flattened out nose. Some people pictured him to themselves only as a shadow.

The only person who moved about with red rimmed eyes was Deborah, and this was sufficiently astonishing, for everyone felt that she had plenty of reason to be glad to have got rid of him so simply.

Sigi once said to her, "I don't understand you, Deborah; you inherited all his beans, potatoes, and millet, and you're running around as if it's the end of the world. And when you start to think about what he did to poor Fred..." But Deborah had simply turned around and run out of the room so as not to have to listen to Sigi's derisive laughter.

* * *

Deborah began to disbelieve in Ranek's death with the passage of time. At first it was only a slight doubt, which, however, increased from one day to the next, so that in the end she was convinced that Ranek was alive. It was a fact that no one could authenticate his death; no one in the sanctuary had seen him die and his death could be traced only to a rumour that a certain Max had spread, a man with a thick bandage around his ears who asserted he had been present when Ranek was shot. The man had been arrested together with Ranek during a round-up at the old railway station. They had been deported. However, the man had escaped again and returned to the Prokov ghetto.

Deborah cross-examined the man thoroughly, hoping to accumulate as much testimony as possible to disprove Ranek's death. First she got him to tell her every detail of their arrest . . . and then continued to investigate, with cautious, groping questions, expecting the man to become unsure in his statements.

Ranek's arrest at the old railway station was preceded by the following events (events about which people had only whispered during the summer months but which were no longer secret now) : the authorities had started with the reconstruction of the old railway station. The bombed-out yard, which was unusable for train traffic, was to be reintegrated with the railway network of Greater Rumania. Since the new station, which had been in operation for a considerable time at this point, could not handle all the supply trains going to the Eastern Front, new sidings to handle the extra traffic were to be constructed at the old station.

In July a group of carefully selected, vigorous young Jews arrived and proceeded to clear the area under police supervision. There was a great deal to do : scrap, the remnants of burnt-out sheds, bent rails, all sorts of old iron had to be carted away, and the ground, pitted by bombs and artillery shells had to be smoothed out again. During the first few days the police paid little attention to the people who infested the two abandoned railway trucks, or to the homeless people who slept under the trucks or in the various bomb craters. The police had their fun with them, threw lumps of earth after them, raped the women

and occasionally beat someone to a pulp . . . but they did not chase them away. This situation did not change until the military inspection team arrived. That day the police started to take action. The area around the old station was cordoned off, and the people living in this confine were deported to some coal mine or other whose exact location the man could not specify.

On that unfortunate day, the man said, he and Ranek had had a rendezvous at the old railway station, for the purpose of completing a deal. Ranek supposedly had wanted to purchase a red scarf belonging to the man's girl friend in exchange for a few potatoes. Ranek had to have the scarf for a barber whose shop was opposite the brothel.

The man said that Ranek was a crook and had managed to buy the damned cloth for three lousy potatoes.

After the deal was completed Ranek had suggested that they play cards. They had played inside one of the trucks. The man said that Ranek had managed to win back his three potatoes in the course of the afternoon. So, the evening before the catastrophe Ranek possessed the three potatoes plus the red scarf and, the man said, Ranek had cheated and derided him shamelessly besides.

When Ranek wanted to leave and go home it was already too late. The police were coming from all sides. The whole area was surrounded. They had been taken unawares and had no chance to escape.

The man reported also that they been taken far away, that they had changed trains several times and that they had covered the rest of the trip on foot; many people who could not walk fast enough were shot by the guards. He said that he had seen Ranek together with other corpses lying in a puddle.

These were the facts that she had managed to extract from the man after repeated questioning.

* * *

But Deborah was not satisfied with that.

The man was sleeping in the bushes behind the house where

he had joined the other homeless ones. She visited him there every so often while Moishe watched the food sacks. She wanted to find out more, but the man's answers remained evasive. It was obvious that she was getting on his nerves with all those questions.

One day as she was looking for the man in the bushes behind the sanctuary one of the homeless had thrown a stone and hit her with it; she had fallen down, bleeding, but had scrambled back up and run back to the yard.

Why do you keep going back there? she had reproached herself. You know very well that the people in the bushes detest us, all of us who have a roof over our heads. The man with the bandages is just as full of hatred as the rest and that's why his answers are so curt, that's why you won't find out anything else from him. Don't go back! They'll stone you. They'll kill you. Hadn't the homeless ones recently ambushed a man from the sanctuary who had only gone behind the house to gather a few dry twigs? Hadn't they fallen on him and stoned him and thrown the half-starved man into a hole he was unable to get out of again? They detest us! They detest us! They're always the first victims whenever there's a roundup . . . and in winter . . . in winter their corpses lie frozen flat on the ground while we are warm inside. Do we help them? No, she thought, we don't help them at all.

The man with the bandage came into the yard occasionally to go to the latrine. That was the only reason he came here, perhaps because he did not like to squat down in the bushes—a last trace of his upbringing not to relieve himself in the open where he and the others slept. She understood that. She was even impressed by it. So the man hadn't gone completely to the dogs yet. Perhaps . . . yes . . . you'll try speaking to him once more.

And she waited for him again. She waited until his figure separated from the rest of the people squatting on the board. As he walked back across the yard toward the bushes, she stopped him and asked him the same questions again.

The man said, "He's dead. He's no longer important. Why are you so interested in him?"

"I'm his sister-in-law. You know that."

The man guffawed. "Sister-in-law . . . so what? You fuss about him as if he were a prince."

"Prince . . ." she said tonelessly.

"A crook," the man said, "once upon a time . . . now a dead crook."

The man gave her a close look and seemed more interested suddenly. "Cheated you too, did he? Probably owes you something, doesn't he? And you're waiting for him to come back?"

She made no reply.

"I understand," the man said. "I feel sorry for you." It really looked as if he felt truly sorry and momentarily forgot the difference in rank that separated them . . . he, the man without a roof over his head . . . and she who was well off and slept in a room.

"I feel sorry for you," he said once again.

"How do you know it was he who lay in the puddle?" she asked. "You said yourself that there was a whole pile of corpses lying there? And how could you recognize one man among so many bodies?" She continued impatiently and desperately, "Why don't you admit it! Why don't you admit that you can't be sure!"

The man spat furiously and left without saying another word. Deborah went back to the room.

* * *

Because her thoughts were so preoccupied with Ranek it seemed to her sometimes at night as if he really had come back.

It was enough to drive her mad. Every rustling of the cardboard pane brought Ranek back into the dark room. In her imagination she could really see him squatting under the extinguished lamp, smoking. Although she couldn't see the end of the butt glowing, she told herself that the window was open and he was hiding the butt in the hollow of his hand, like people who smoke in the open at night. She imagined that he kept staring over at her and that he was very lonely . . . and his lonely eyes penetrated deeply into her heart.

One night she could no longer bear it on her place. She had seen something again : the shadow of a broad hat.

She stumbled to the window. The moon had painted a light spot on the window sill. But below this spot, where she had seen the hat, there was nothing . . . nothing but darkness and snoring. She lit a match. An unfamiliar man was sleeping on Ranek's place. Someone from the street, just as Ranek was someone who'd come in off the street. She kept staring at the spot a while longer. There was a little more room under the window now since she had taken the precaution of bringing the food sacks to her own place under the clothes hooks. On her way back she walked into Red. She could smell his sweat. She didn't know what he was doing at the window suddenly. She stared at him dumbfounded . . . and then the match went out.

"What do you want?"

"Nothing," Red said. "I just followed you."

"Why?" she whispered.

"You're wasting your time," Red said. "Ranek isn't there any longer."

"What do you want?"

"Nothing," he laughed. "I always have fun when somebody's going mad."

"I'm not mad," she said. And then, without wanting to, she uttered, "I saw his hat."

Red stood motionless in front of her, like a rock.

"Were you after his hat?" he asked suddenly.

"What do you mean?"

"It was a good hat," Red said, "I'll be damned if it wasn't a good hat."

"Don't bother me with that," she said indignantly, "this sort of conversation gets on my nerves. And let me get by now. I want to lie down again."

"I haven't a hat," Red said, "and Ranek has no use for it any more. He should have given it to me."

"You're talking nonsense, as if he could have known they would get him."

"Right. Of course he couldn't have known that. But it still

bothers me. I always had my eyes on his hat, you know; I always wanted a hat like that."

* * *

Sometimes her thoughts returned to this strange encounter with Red. Particularly his question: were you after his hat? This question was not entirely unjustified—she could have exchanged the hat for a scarf . . . and she needed a scarf. Red was just being practical like everyone else here.

What should she have answered him? That she had been thinking of something altogether different? Red wouldn't understand that, and he wouldn't believe her, either. Should she have answered that the hat was merely a symbol, just like a cigarette butt or some other object that Ranek had used or worn frequently and that reminded her of him.

Certain objects must contain a magic quality because they are capable of bearing the mark of a man, the stamp of his face, his laughter, his voice, and of many other things.

* * *

One evening Moishe said to her, "Ranek would turn over in his grave if he knew how frivolous you are with his food."

Deborah tried not to hear the words "turn over in his grave." "Why?" she asked. "What do you mean?"

"Yesterday you distributed soup among the people."

"It was the Sabbath yesterday," Deborah said.

"So what?" Moishe said.

"You're supposed to rejoice during the Sabbath," Deborah said, smiling, "and there are so few things to rejoice about in the world! That's why I decided to do it."

"To do what?"

" . . . to cook more soup than I can eat myself once a week and distribute it among those who need it most of all."

Moishe nodded in agreement, but he looked at her the way you look at someone who is out of his mind.

The ghetto remained quiet. There was the occasional incident, such as the recent roundup at the old railway station, and every so often a few people were dragged out of their houses or picked up in the open and taken away, but most of the people who could still remember the extensive razzias of the previous winter and spring of 1942 considered these actions, during which, after all, relatively few people lost their lives, completely insignificant.

No one knew what was really the matter. There were people who were of the opinion that the Rumanian authorities had finally realized that the ghetto inhabitants would bite the dust of their own accord and that therefore there was no further need for the mass deportations. Then there were others who felt that the news from the Russian front kept the authorities busy, and those who asserted that the momentary lull was nothing but the quiet before the storm; they said they had heard from a trustworthy source that the ghetto would be liquidated with the onset of the winter frost, indeed during the course of a single night. All this was empty talk. The best thing was not to think about it too much and to use the time to relax.

The hot summer months were over once and for all. Autumn had arrived. The rain had turned the town into a morass, and now it had regained its familiar colour: the dull colour of grey mud. At the sanctuary half the fence had been blown down by a storm, but strangely enough a few people had immediately volunteered to repair it. The people set the rotten boards up

again and their zeal went so far that they plugged the gaps with new boards. But their motive was not mere industriousness.

"Why are you nailing that fence together, you idiots?" one of the new ones asked recently.

"So that they can't see the house."

"Who?"

"The police."

"But everything is quiet now."

"There's no telling if—"

"Well, so what? They know exactly where the house is, and besides, one can still see the roof from the street."

"We know that. We just thought—"

"You must have puked out your brains! Why don't you stick your stupid bird heads into the sand right away?"

Now the fence stood half under water. A part of the yard was covered with puddles around which the people beat a wide circle. It was fortunate that the trench used for the latrine was deep enough and did not run over despite the rain.

* * *

A living skeleton got stuck with its foot rags this afternoon at the Bazaar. Deborah, who was standing a few yards away, saw this and suddenly had the peculiar feeling that this was Ranek. She stood there as if paralyzed and stared at the skeleton. It made desperate efforts to pull its bony feet out of the deep mud and place them on firmer ground; it moaned and screamed and contorted its eyes and begged the people to help it. Deborah rushed to help him and made her way as quickly as was possible through the laughing crowd that was delighting in the spectacle. Suddenly she saw the skeleton crumple. The effort had been too much. Deborah bent panting over the dead man. The death mask showed no resemblance to Ranek.

Deborah left the Bazaar. She felt happier than she had for a long time, and while she hurried on she thought about the incident and felt ashamed. It isn't right, she murmured to herself, how can you be happy about something like that? And a voice inside her answered: because it wasn't Ranek... be-

cause it wasn't Ranek. . . . And the voice now said : he's alive, he's alive, he's alive.

Instinctively she walked in the direction of the town park. The unending, unbroken grey of the street made her eyes smart suddenly and she felt the need to see something else, and this need, too, she had not felt for a long time. Perhaps because I know that he's alive, she thought, and because I know that my waiting isn't in vain, and because I now have the right to be happy. And why shouldn't I go into the park? Why not? Somewhere there is bound to be a patch of grass that has not been buried in mud, she thought. She felt an overwhelming longing that increased the closer she came to the park . . . the longing for life, and even if all she could take with her were nature's last goodbye.

But no trace of grass remained in the town park. And the sight of the trees hurt her quite literally; most of them had been sawed off, and those that were still standing were already as bare as they are by the end of November. The harsh wind hadn't left a single leaf on them. There they stood, serried like naked corpses who, diabolically, were condemned to stand upright. There's the horse skeleton from last year,"she thought, and over there is the dead dog, and there on the benches lie the homeless ones of whom you can't ever tell whether they are only asleep or dead.

You should have never come here, she thought. The best thing is to go back home.

3

Ranek reappeared in early November. The first one to see him was the cigarette boy, who flinched when he suddenly saw Ranek's emaciated frame wobbling across the muddy street.

The boy followed him. While he walked curiously after Ranek,

but always keeping his distance, he could not help thinking back to the time when Ranek had sold him the place to sleep . . . he had paid punctually, his down payment as well as the rest of the cigarettes he owed Ranek, believing that the business was now settled. He had been mistaken. For later on that night Ranek had taken everything he had left in his box . . . and that made altogether thirty loose cigarettes, ten Papyrossas and twenty of the Rumanian kind. The boy remembered how he had given the box to his sister shortly before falling asleep because Ljuba's sleep was lighter than his. She had hidden the box under her skirt. She woke up as Ranek was filching the box during the night and she recognized Ranek by his large hat, and Ljuba had begun to wail and the people—as usual—had broken out cursing, and Deborah, Ranek's sister-in-law, who slept by the wall under the clothes hooks close to Ljuba, had taken the bawling Ljuba into her arms and asked her what had happened. When she had found out she took Ljuba by the hand and went with her to the window to Ranek's place. Deborah seemed to have much influence over Ranek. For after she had talked to him for a while Ranek returned the cigarettes.

So he's alive, the boy thought regretfully. He's alive even though everyone thought he was dead.

The boy did not take his eyes off Ranek. Ranek did not turn around. He just kept walking down the road. After about fifteen minutes he stopped. The boy pressed himself timidly against the nearest house wall. But there was no need for him to be so careful—Ranek's eyes were fixed on a grey patch of road in front of him. The boy thought: you know this street! The fellow is standing by the demolished Lenin monument. He had often sold cigarettes here when it was too risky to do so in the Pushkinskaja. There was a good deal of traffic at this intersection at times. Now, towards evening, however, it was silent and deserted.

Perhaps the fellow's loony, the boy thought; he keeps looking at the same spot in the gutter as if he were seeing something that wasn't there at all. An empty spot, just a patch of dirty street. There's nothing there. Why does he keep looking at it?

Ranek noticed him now. "What are you doing here, you brat?"

"Nothing," the boy said, frightened, his blood shooting into his small, pale face, lending it an odd colour, like a tomato that had ripened too soon. "Nothing," he stuttered, "I... I just noticed you earlier than you noticed me." And the boy jumped away and tried to run off, but Ranek had already grabbed him. "I'm not going to harm you," Ranek laughed, "no reason to be so frightened. Became curious and followed me, eh? Probably thought I was a ghost? Well, I'm still the same fellow, my boy."

"People said you died," the boy said now, regaining his courage. There's no need to be afraid of him, he thought, all he has is a big trap; he isn't going to do anything to you. All he does is steal. There you have to watch out. But otherwise he is harmless.

"The man with a bandage round his ears told me," the boy said. "He told me he'd seen you lying in a puddle."

"I see," Ranek said, "so that's what he told you, good old Max."

"Yes, that he did."

"When did he get back, the man with the bandage round his ears?"

"He's been back a while."

"Well, that's something."

"You came all the way on foot, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Not him. He came by train."

"So that's why. But how?"

"On the roof of a freight wagon, he said... that's what he told us."

"Really?"

"Yes... you see..."

"Yes, trains travel fast," Ranek said, smiling, "that's better than on foot... at least sometimes it's better. I'd like to know how he managed that?"

"That I don't know."

Ranek nodded thoughtfully. Then he said, "He's still wearing his bandage, is he?"

"Yes."

"That surprises me. That really surprises me. Lea isn't around any more and he actually doesn't need the bandage any more. He just wore it on account of her."

"I can remember Lea," the boy said, "from the cellar. Isn't she coming back?"

"No, she isn't coming back," Ranek said, "definitely not."

It had started to rain again, a needle-like drizzle that caught the twilight street like a net; the wind had grown stronger too and howled through the ruins. Suddenly Ranek let go of the boy because a coughing fit shook him; his face distorted itself with the cramp and he pressed his hands to his chest. When he had calmed down again he said, "It isn't really cold yet but one is already freezing; one needs a shirt and a sweater. Don't you think so?"

"An overcoat would be best of all," the boy said.

"Right," Ranek said, "right."

The boy saw goose-pimples on Ranek's face; stretching all the way from the brim of his wide hat to the folds of skin along his neck and the opening in the jacket through which you could see his naked chest. That fellow is already freezing, he thought gleefully; he isn't going to survive the Russian winter, that's for sure. The boy grinned and asked cockily, "Why were you looking at the gutter like that before?"

"I was being sentimental," Ranek said. "Always happens to me when I pass by here." And he added, musing, "You know what that is . . . to become sentimental?"

The boy shook his head.

"A feeling," Ranek said, "and a particular feeling at that."

"Where do you feel it?"

"In the arse," Ranek said, "it's an itch."

The boy understood that.

"At one time," Ranek said, "one used to feel that in one's chest, yes, my boy, in one's chest, that's the whole point, but not because of the lice, you know . . . farther in, where the lice can't get at . . . in your insides, so to speak, where the heart is. You felt it with your heart. Today all I get is the shits when I get excited."

He continued, "Back then, in spring, I came by here. I was

looking for a place to stay. And as I came by here I saw someone, such a distinguished dead gentleman with a walking stick . . . and believe it or not he was so kind as to give me a cigarette."

"That was nice of him," the boy said, grinning.

"That's it," Ranek said, "and one can really appreciate that if one hasn't smoked anything decent for a long time. But, you know, to be honest with you, it isn't remembering the dead man that excites me so much, it's just the day of which he keeps reminding me."

"What kind of day?" the boy asked.

"A memorarable day," Ranek said. "That was the day I moved into the sanctuary."

"That day back in spring?"

"Yes, back in spring. And you know . . . I've moved quite a few times . . . all of us, I think, have moved quite a few times . . . but moving that day was something special."

"What was so special about it?"

"Because I found a home that day," Ranek said, "a real home, the kind of home I never had before here in Prokov. Everything I had before was only temporary."

The boy was trotting unhappily alongside Ranek. Why am I listening to all this rot, he thought, it's late and getting dark and he's walking much too slowly.

"Couldn't we walk faster?"

"Not with my frost boils," Ranek said, "they're from last winter and they still hurt whenever it gets cold."

"I've got to get going," the boy said grumpily, "because it's getting dark. And you walk too slowly for me." But Ranek clawed his bony fingers into the boy's sleeve.

"No, you're staying with me," he said. "I don't like to walk alone."

"Let me go," the boy begged, "please let me go. Ljuba is waiting for me. I have to walk faster."

"There are a few things I'd still like to ask you," Ranek said without letting go of the boy, and now he took something edible out of his pocket. Its origin was dubious but upon closer inspection the boy realized that it was a lump of sliced potatoes.

They were half charred and as hard as stone; Ranek must have roasted them at a campfire under the open sky and then kept them in his pocket as a last resort. But the boy accepted them and started chewing busily.

* * *

Ranek listened attentively to what the boy had to report. Although it was somewhat disconnected and did not make perfect sense, it was enough for him to form a picture.

When Ranek had seen the city again after such a long time, he had been in a good mood; he was alive and had returned, and that was the main thing; now he became afraid. The news dripped like venom into his blood; he forgot his sore, aching feet, and it was as if a part of his brain were paralyzed suddenly. Typhus has broken out, he thought, in the sanctuary . . . typhus . . . so it had happened after all.

The boy had ended his report some time ago, and now they were walking silently through the evening. The wind blew the rain into their faces. What are you going to do? Ranek thought. Nothing immediately, you'll decide later on. Later on, of course. First of all go home.

After a while he asked, "When did you have the first case of typhus? When was that?"

"About a week ago," the boy said.

"Why didn't you do something about it?"

The boy laughed softly, as if he suddenly were making fun of Ranek.

"You could at least have put the sick persons into the hallway," Ranek said, "so that they didn't infect the others; you were crazy, how could you be so lax and let them stay in the room?"

"More than twenty cases in one week," the boy said. "If we had put all of them in the hallway the people in the street would have noticed something, and we didn't want anybody to know what was going on; that would only have alarmed the authorities, and then the police would have come and put us all in the hospital. And everybody is killed in the hospital."

"You're right. No one would have survived in that case."

"Yes . . . no one is supposed to find out," the boy said, and his voice sounded again hard, and definite and old.

"Who was the first one?"

"One of the new fellows."

"Something like that really spreads fast."

"Yes."

"Damned fast."

"We dragged the first few cases down into the hallway but when there were more and more of them we carried them back upstairs."

"You know," Ranek said, "every so often somebody would croak in the sanctuary, but those poor bastards starved to death. All I can remember are two cases of typhus."

"Only two?" the boy asked.

"Only two," Ranek said. "One of them was a certain Levy, the other was my brother, but he didn't really belong because he never got to see the room; he only got as far as the hallway."

"Why are you telling me that?"

Ranek laughed grimly. "We always had a guardian angel in front of our door."

"You're kidding me. There are no angels."

"Who knows?" Ranek said.

"Then he didn't help much," the boy said harshly.

"An angel like that is mortal, the same as we are," Ranek said, smiling wanly. "When his time is up, he drops everything."

"Perhaps the angel got infected," the boy said, grinning.

Ranek nodded. "That's probably what happened. God should have given him some shots before sending him to us . . . probably forgot to do it."

"Or perhaps he just died of starvation," the boy said.

"That's possible too," Ranek said.

They had almost reached their destination. Ranek now hobbled more quickly alongside the boy. His heart suddenly started palpitating. Because of the dark he could not see more than a few yards ahead of him, but he knew that they were very close to the fence that hid the lonely house from the street. And, as

many months ago when he had sought protection in the sanctuary in his despair, the house seemed to him even now, despite everything, like an island, like a piece of firm ground in the turbulent sea which he had searched for a long time and had finally found.

What would Deborah say? Would she be glad he was back? Or disappointed? Had she forgotten him?

"Is my sister-in-law still healthy?" he asked the boy; he had wanted to ask this question for some time and had only delayed it, and now he felt his voice tremble.

"She was this morning," the boy said; "at least it seemed to me she was. But I was gone the whole day."

"Will you do me a favour? I'll give you something else to eat for it later on. Will you?"

"Yes," the boy said.

"I am going to wait in the hallway for my sister-in-law," Ranek said insistently. "I don't want to burst in up there. You understand, don't you . . . ? Send her down. Tell her that I've come back."

4

The boy followed Deborah inquisitively into the hallway. He hadn't been prepared for the fact that his news would have such a devastating effect on her. She had barely let him finish when she had rushed crying out of the room.

The boy was leaning on the bannister on the landing now and was looking uncomprehendingly down into the twilight hallway, where two people had found each other again. The man stood there as straight as a candle, like someone who is trying to master his embarrassment; the woman being sobbing around his neck. What was happening down there? the boy thought. What a lot of empty gestures. Deborah can't possibly like that crummy

fellow? But then he remembered that the two were alone, perhaps just as alone in the world as he and Ljuba, and that they had no one except each other.

He kept quiet and waited. After a while Ljuba came out of the room. "Misha," she said timidly, "Misha."

"Stay inside!" he said brusquely.

"You aren't nice to me," the little one said sadly. "I didn't see you the whole day and when you come home you didn't even talk to me. What's the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter," the boy said angrily. "Go back inside. I'll join you later." But then he suddenly felt sorry for her and held her back. He had left her at home intentionally today because he did not want her to get her feet wet. He knew how lonely she must have been all day without him.

"I didn't mean it that way," he said, "it's just because of those two down there." And now he pointed out to her what preoccupied him.

But in the meantime night had sneaked into the hallway on soft feet and the figure of the man and the woman in the entrance looked unreal, remote and as shadowy as if they were interwoven with each other, as if they were one. The child did not recognize them.

"The woman is Deborah," the boy whispered, "you know . . . the one who sleeps next to us. The man is Ranek. He's come back."

The little girl nodded. She could still remember Ranek.

"You can't forget him," the boy said.

"That's true. He's someone you can't forget."

For a while they looked down without saying anything. Then the boy took a cigarette out of the box. "Were you very bored today?" he asked.

"Yes, very," the child said.

"Do you know why I left you at home today?"

"You said so that I would get my feet wet."

"That's true," the boy said, grinning, "but I had one other reason."

"What was it?"

"I don't want to have you running after me all the time. Not just because the people laugh at us because of it. I want you to learn to be by yourself. You have to be more independent. What if I die?"

The boy handed her the box of matches. "Give me a light. Let's see what you can do. That too is part of being independent."

The little one obeyed. She did it correctly. The boy laughed softly and blew smoke into the air. "I'm going to put the cigarette down as part of our business expenses," he said. "You know what that is, expenses?"

The little one shook her head.

"You really are quite childish still," the boy said. "Sometimes I ask myself what's going to become of you when I die. You know, I worry about you."

"You promised me once that you will always stay with me," the child said. "Do you remember?"

"No," the boy said harshly.

"Yes, you did. I'm sure. You said so."

"Is that what you believe?"

The child nodded. The boy regarded her thoughtfully, and then he suddenly turned his head away. He finished his cigarette in silence, then he flipped the unextinguished butt in a wide arc downstairs. Without really wanting to he had aimed at the entrance. The butt landed near the couple on the wet ground and hissed, but the couple did not seem to notice it.

"It looks as if those two belong together," the boy said, "the way we two do; they don't have anybody else either."

"No one else?" the child asked.

"They are the last also," the boy said.

* * *

Slowly but surely people drifted into the hallway to look at Ranek. Seidel grabbed him by the shoulder and then felt along his throat as if he wanted to convince himself that what he was touching was really flesh and blood, whereas the businessman's wife, who leaned slackly on Seidel's side, just stared at Ranek

in dumb amazement. Red and the old Levy woman were satisfied to circle him a few times and to make derogatory comments. Other people whom he knew came, and people whom he did not know, but none of them stayed long and soon he was alone again.

"What's happened to Sigi?" Ranek asked.

"Sigi has typhus," Deborah said.

"Who else?"

"Little Stella."

"Who else?" he asked again, patiently and cold.

"Sarah's husband," she said.

"The school teacher," he whispered. "Sarah's husband."

"You never told me anything about Sarah," she said laconically.

"But he told you?"

"Yes, Ranek."

"He talked to me only once . . . never again afterwards."

"But he talked to me," she said. "To me, Ranek!"

"Who else? Is Moishe one of them too?"

She shook her head. He asked no further questions.

"Come upstairs now," she said. "Or aren't you curious? The room has changed."

"You go," he said, "I just want to go to the yard for a moment."

"Aren't you feeling well?"

"Oh yes . . . excellent. But I haven't been to a genuine latrine for a long time."

She smiled now. "The latrine is still the same," she said.

* * *

When he entered the room later on he was calm and composed. Deborah and the boy had prepared him for what he would find and it did not surprise him.

The first change he noticed was around the kitchen stove. The area was better lighted than it used to be; the lamp hung by the door now, no longer at the window. He also noticed that the clothes line that used to run diagonally through the length of the room had been attached high above the stove and now

was strung merely across the width of the room, to the other wall.

Red had already crawled under the stove. His legs stuck way out from underneath as usual. Among the people bustling around the stove Ranek noticed a fat man who was busying himself with the fire at the moment. When the man straightened up Ranek recognized him : Dr Blum. Damn it, it struck him, what's he doing here? A few new pots were standing on the stove with instruments boiling in them, and he saw a pair of rubber gloves swimming in the kettle. So Blum was not visiting the typhus patients. Who was he going to cut up? Ranek shrugged his shoulders. That's none of my business, he thought.

What caught his attention now was the back part of the room. The death rattle of the sick resounded from there out of the semi-darkness, coming out of many throats at once, though it seemed as if it were a single voice that begged for help and pity. The typhus cases were lying behind a wooden partition that stretched across the room about three yards in front of the window, cutting the room into two unequal parts. These parts reminded Ranek of a slaughter house for chickens he had known in the provinces; in front the large room for the live chickens, and behind the long slaughtering bench the little back room where occasionally a single chicken would twitch slightly.

A good idea, that wooden partition, Ranek thought. Couldn't have dreamed up anything better yourself. The healthy people kept the typhus cases away from themselves for the time being. They were without food and water or any sort of care and would die shortly. And then they would be rid of them. They would be dragged outside, as had always been the custom with corpses, and the undertakers would never know what had been the matter; they would think they had starved to death, which of course was true in part. This way the authorities found out nothing. Really a very good idea, Ranek thought. A good arrangement. There was no room for pity. Not under these circumstances. Anyone who was sick ought to die. Sick persons were vermin. If one got rid of them quickly there was hope that the living might survive. The room would be thoroughly cleaned and everything would be all right again.

Yet these thoughts did not make him feel any easier. Who could guarantee that the epidemic would not spread to the other side of the barrier? No, he thought, no one can guarantee that. And now, as so often before, he asked himself: are you only going to stay the night? Are you going to find yourself new quarters tomorrow?

But he knew he would not go out and search again this time. He would wait, he would hope. One had to be optimistic. This was his home. He had no other.

Someone ripped open the door from outside. Ranek was shoved violently aside and fell against the stove. When he turned around he recognized little Stella's mother. She looked stupefied, then she hesitantly offered him her hand. "So you've returned," she said.

"They can't finish me off as easily as that," Ranek said, grinning.

The woman nodded. She gave him the same strange look the businessman's wife had given him before, and, like the latter, her mouth was agape and she was unable to utter another word.

"I know," he said, "I know . . . little Stella . . . I am honestly sorry for you."

The woman moved her lips as if she was gasping for air. Then words came: "Stella is dead."

"I thought she was merely sick."

"Stella is dead," she repeated, and her eyes suddenly became hard.

Of course, he thought. Anyone on the other side of the partition is as good as dead. He wanted to say: she's lucky. But he thought better of it.

"Yes, it's bad," he said.

The woman left him and went to her place. Ranek spread his jacket near the stove and sat down on it. He took care not to touch Red's legs. He had no idea whether Red was asleep or just lying low. Perhaps he would let him sleep under the stove for a little tobacco later on. Perhaps not. It didn't matter to Ranek; the typhus cases on the other side were practically lying on top of each other, and there were enough gaps on this side where you could squeeze in.

Deborah and Moishe were standing a few steps from the barrier. They were talking with each other in low voices. They were probably talking about the baby—they were fondling it constantly and smiling.

Deborah had not seen Ranek come in. When she looked towards the stove finally and noticed him there, she made a hurried movement. And then she came towards him. Ranek moved to the side and made room for her on the jacket.

* * *

"Moise's staring over at us," Ranek said. "Why doesn't he come over. He hasn't said hello yet."

"He'll do it later on; give him some time, you know how he is: you came back, but not his wife; he never heard from her again."

"People are always envious," Ranek said bitterly. "The only time they don't hold it against you is when you drop dead."

"Sometimes people even hold that against you," she said smiling.

"There's no pleasing people."

"That's right, Ranek. That was never possible anyway. How can you satisfy everyone? But to understand the other person . . . that is possible if one tries. And that is a great deal already."

He nodded absent-mindedly. His glance fluttered through the large room, alighted momentarily on the dark spot on the window sill where the lamp used to stand, returned, and now rested on the pale face beside him.

"Did Moishe at least help you a little?" he asked.

"Yes, Ranek," she said. "For a while I was able to live off the food you left behind. Moishe helped me a little when I ran out."

"He owes it to you," Ranek said. "You are like a mother to the child."

"He behaved decently. He often gave me something to eat."

"Often, but not regularly."

"He doesn't have anything left either, Ranek. Sometimes there's hardly enough for him and the baby. He was decent."

"So you went to the soup kitchen, right?"

"Yes, Ranek," she said. "I managed."

He nodded again. So she managed, he thought. Without you. And why shouldn't she? Why shouldn't she be able to manage without him? After all, she had been alone before, alone with Fred, who had only been a burden, and that had been even more difficult.

He started to ask her about several things. "I talked to Stella's mother before . . . tell me, did she have any trouble with Seidel after I left?"

"Yes," Deborah said.

"Is she still sleeping between Seidel and the businessman's widow?"

Deborah shook her head. "She changed places with the widow. There was always trouble . . . at night . . . because Seidel had to climb over her to get to the widow. Sometimes Seidel was too lazy to climb and so he simply started something with her because that was more practical. And then she would scream, she screamed so piercingly that we others always woke up."

"Did Seidel also try something with Stella . . . I mean, when Stella was still healthy and slept on the platform? She lay next to her mother, didn't she? That's how I arranged it when they moved in. Did he—"

"No, I don't think so," she said uncertainly, "at least I never heard the child scream."

"She was always a quiet child," Ranek said.

"True . . . but I don't think so, Ranek . . . that . . ."

"Listening to you, one gets the idea that something like that really touches you deeply. You know, you shouldn't let it affect you."

"You know, Ranek," she sighed, "one's own life is sad enough already, but to have to live skin to skin and see everything the others do whether you want to or not, that's the worst part; there is so much filth and ugliness, and one is in the middle of it and can't get away."

"It's high time you got used to your surroundings and stopped thinking about them."

"How do you go about not thinking about them, Ranek?" she asked, and she said it as if it were just a joke.

"You simply don't think," he said. "Do you understand now?"

"Yes," she said, "I understand, but I don't believe I will ever understand it really."

Now he asked, "Do you remember the cripple who used to sleep next to me?"

She nodded. "He's behind the partition," she said slowly.

"Did they leave him in his artificial leg?"

"No. They took it from him. They couldn't have done anything meaner."

"There really was no need to take it away."

"Because it took up too much room . . . that's why."

"He was always afraid somebody would steal it from him one day."

"And the people kept making jokes. They told him to pull in both legs, not only the healthy one; just imagine."

"Did they use the leg for firewood?"

"Of course," she said.

Only now he remembered that he hadn't seen Hofer, either. "Hofer too?" he asked, nodding in the direction of the partition.

"Yes, Hofer too," she said.

"He was a fine man. It's a pity about him." And suddenly he remembered that Dr Blum was standing behind him, and he whispered to her, "Hofer didn't make it and a bastard like that Blum is healthy."

"He is a bastard. Everybody detests him."

"What's he doing here anyway today? Who's he operating on?"

"A woman . . . not a real operation, just . . . oh, Ranek, don't ask. You'll see for yourself."

"Why won't you tell me?"

"You'll see it yourself. It's something so nauseating. And right here . . . and at this time . . . it wasn't necessary, Ranek . . . but you'll see yourself. Don't ask me."

"All right," he said, "I won't ask you any more."

It was unpleasantly warm near the stove. He could feel the fire warming his naked back, and he turned and stretched his

upper body, revelling in the warmth. Red was snoring. It was a contagious sound, and Ranek obviously had to make an effort to keep his eyes open. He did not want to sleep yet. There would be enough time for that later on—now that he was back home. How warm it is, he thought, and how good. Funny that you never really appreciate it unless you've been on the road for a while. A person quickly gets used to the good things and forgets too quickly. But one shouldn't forget, he thought, not even when you've sat by a fire for days, weeks, months on end; even then one shouldn't forget the street. Otherwise one becomes ungrateful.

"Tell me something about yourself," she begged him. "You've told me so little so far."

"Later," he said.

"Is it true that they shot many of you on the way?"

"Yes, a lot."

"Max saw you lying in a puddle," she said suddenly. "Among the dead."

"I threw myself down next to the dead so that they wouldn't notice. That's an old trick." He grinned ever so slightly. "Of course, I wasn't unlucky, either, it was raining and there was a dense fog . . . and those fellows were in a hurry."

"Tell more more."

"Later," he said again. "First we're going to eat something. I don't want you to lose your appetite just yet."

"What do you have to eat?"

He showed her the rest of the sliced potatoes and then took a package wrapped in burlap out of the pocket. He had cut the patch from the clothes of a dead man since he had no other wrapping.

"Do you know what's inside there?"

"Corn," she said.

"No," he said, grinning, "guessed wrong."

"What?"

"Bread," he said.

Now he opened the package and showed her the bread. It was a piece as thick as a fist, black and sticky. He turned it every

way and then broke it in two, and pressed one half into her hand.

"That's nice. That's a good sign that you thought of me," she said softly, her dark eyes taking on a happy glow.

"I didn't think of you at all," he said smiling. "I would have eaten the bread before on the street, but I couldn't because the boy was with me."

"You're lying again." She was laughing now, but it was a tender laugh. "You waited on purpose until you got home. You wanted to share it with me. You couldn't eat it without me."

"You're mistaken," he mocked. "Or do you think I'm a fool?"

She shook her head and was still laughing, her knees touching his knee, very softly as if it were unintentional, but she did not withdraw them, and then she nestled her cheek against his hard shoulder, and she was still laughing as if he had said something amusing and utterly unbelievable, yet something kind. Then her face suddenly turned serious again; her narrow head against his shoulder slowly moved sideways, and she looked up at him. "Ranek," she said softly, "I was so alone the whole time. You have no idea how alone I was."

"Eat," he said.

"You aren't going to go away again, Ranek? Tell me that you won't go away again."

"I'm staying with you," he said.

"Always?" she whispered.

"Yes, always," he said.

"And what if they get one of us?"

"That can't happen," he said, and smiled. "Certainly not. We'll let them catch us together . . . only together. The two of us. Always together."

"Yes, Ranek, always. And what if one of us dies?"

"It's better not to talk about that," he said.

"Why am I suddenly so happy, Ranek? I know . . . I don't have the right . . . after everything that's happened here."

"I don't know," he said. "Are you really happy?"

"Yes. Very. So very much. And you?"

"Yes," he said. "Me too. And I don't know why." And he

thought, Why are we lying? We aren't happy. Or are we? Are we? Are we really?

"I'm becoming uglier every day," she said suddenly.

"No, you are becoming more beautiful," he said.

"Do you really mean that? Or are you just saying it?"

"I mean it. You are very beautiful."

"Take a look at my hair," she whispered.

"Yes, but I'm looking at it."

"Touch it."

He did. He caressed her hair.

"It's become matted," she said. "And it used to be like silk. Everybody said so."

"It's still like silk," he said. "And you are beautiful. You know, I knew all along that you were beautiful. But I didn't really know it. I just had a feeling you were. But now I know it. Now I can see it."

"Say something else to me."

"No. No more now."

"Why?"

"Because you're supposed to eat now."

"All right," she said, smiling. She took a good bite of her bread, and now he did not wait any longer either.

5

Blum was already at the sanctuary early in the afternoon. He wanted to have the business over and done with as quickly as possible. He did not like the idea of having to spend another night in this pigsty. But then he had trouble with the fire; first the stovepipe had been clogged and the smoke from the pile of wood shavings and newspaper with which he had lit the fire blew back into the room; he had cleaned the stovepipe and

started all over again; then it had turned out that the thick split logs were wet, and it just went on like that. It was evening by the time the fire finally burned.

Blum did not come of his own accord this time. He was under pressure.

Some time ago his mistress, the young and pretty nurse, had died of dysentery. It had been a heavy blow for him. The loss had hurt for almost an entire week—and that was quite something. Blum had lost several pounds that week, and he still hadn't made them up. After the nurse was buried, Blum had looked around for new quarters. He had been lucky. After a few days of looking he had found a bed in the private apartment of a couple who had no children. It was a clean room. Although Blum was not in the most favourable position with these people—sub-tenant remains sub-tenant, and all landlords should go to the devil, a lot of despots that do nothing but gripe—yet he was glad that he finally had a bed of his own and no longer had to sleep with strangers on the same platform. While moving into his new quarters he had to promise his new landlord not to receive visitors and, most important, not to let any questionable elements across their threshold while they were out of the house. Nor was he permitted to practice his profession in his new room, something he did not intend to do in any case. "We've rented you the place to sleep in," the people had said. "For no other purpose. Remember that."

However, yesterday Blum had had visitors. Daniel, the policeman, accompanied by a woman, a person who was badly run down. Blum was obviously embarrassed. The couple were not at home. What was he going to do now? He could hardly tell the policeman to leave the room—something like that might be the end of you.

The policeman introduced the woman: "Jente Lipsky." He added with a grin, "They call her the long-haired one at the sanctuary." The woman grinned too, gave him her hand, and nodded silently.

"I want you to do me a favour," the policeman said. "It's about an abortion."

He pointed to the woman, and the woman again nodded silently and grinned at Blum.

"What's that poor slut going to do with a child," the policeman said, and then he explained the case to him in detail.

The policeman watched while Blum examined the woman. He sat arrogantly in the black easy chair and was smoking. When Blum was done with the woman he said, "I can't take this case."

"You will take it," the policeman said. "You can bet your life on that."

They quarrelled for a while, but, as was to be expected, the policeman threatened deportation, and Blum, completely intimidated, finally gave in.

"I can't do anything in this place," Blum stammered. "It isn't my place and there's a good chance they would evict me."

"Then do it in the sanctuary," the policeman said.

"You performed another operation once in our place," the woman said.

"If you insist," Blum said, nodding, and he felt himself becoming pale.

"We've got a few cases of typhus," the woman said. "Daniel knows all about it; he's promised to keep his trap shut; no one is supposed to know about it. Of course, you'll keep your trap shut too?"

"Of course," Blum smiled convulsively.

"Perhaps you'll do it in your apartment after all?" the policeman said, smirking.

"Impossible," Blum said.

"Don't you see, Daniel, that he can't do it here? They'll just throw him on the street if he does."

"Yes, I can see why."

"He won't catch typhus in our place. He's a doctor."

"Sometimes a doctor also catches it," Blum said, smiling thinly.

"You'll just be careful," the woman consoled him. "You're a doctor."

The policeman got up, opened his beautiful cigarette case, and offered Blum one of the Russian kind. "The woman of course

can't pay you," he said nicely, "and I don't happen to be flush at the moment. But if you ever need me, well you know . . ."

"That's all right," Blum said.

"When do you want to do it? How about tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow, then . . ."

"The afternoon is the best time in our place," the woman said.

"In the afternoon, then," Blum said slowly.

The two of them said good-bye. But on the threshold the woman suddenly stopped. "Daniel, wait for me outside. I have something I want to say to the doctor."

And then when they were alone the woman whispered, "I'm embarrassed about not being able to pay."

Blum shrugged her off. "Is the child really Daniel's?" he asked.

"I don't know," the woman said. "There were so many of them."

"Why does he go all out for you like that?"

The woman shrugged her shoulders.

Blum gave an ugly laugh.

"He has his moods," the woman said softly. "First he treated me like an animal and now all of a sudden . . . I can't understand it. He's a funny person."

"A fine fellow," Blum said contemptuously.

"You're afraid of him, aren't you?"

"I just don't want to start anything with him. It isn't worth it."

The woman nodded absent-mindedly, and then she started again. "I can't pay you but if you ever want to do it with me . . ."

Blum spat out in disgust as he thought back on her suggestion. Now he cast a sidelong glance at the woman who sat cowering on the platform waiting for him. She'll just have to be patient, he thought, I can't work miracles. He was going to perform the operation on the platform, in the corner by the door. The place belonged to somebody by the name of Janov. Blum had discussed the matter with Janov, who finally let him use the place for a piece of black market chocolate.

Blum turned back to the pots. The fire was burning well now,

but the water still wasn't boiling. He moved the pots closer to the flame and the water that spilled over the sides during this process formed little drops that moved back and forth on the hot stove like bugs.

Hofer had said to him once that pregnancies do not occur in a state of catastrophic malnutrition. Blum could remember it exactly. Hofer and he had not seen eye to eye from the beginning, but they had been in complete agreement on this question. But what about this case? he thought. A miracle, eh? Nature won't let us put her in the strait-jacket of our laws. Was that true? Blum soothed his last doubts. She's a whore, too, he thought, just like the other woman he and Hofer had performed the caesarean on. So she got a little bit of bread occasionally. She isn't as well fed as the other one, but still relatively well fed. Of course, relatively well fed, that was sufficient. He preferred this interpretation. This was a solid explanation. He was not the sort of man who became enthusiastic about miracles.

* * *

Blum was aware that the people in the room regarded the purpose of his visit as a provocation. Occasionally he glanced nervously over his shoulder, haunted by the feeling that people were plotting something against him. But the only suspicious thing he noticed was a few poor slobs who stood around the stove and kept staring at him with their empty eyes. Blum asked himself whether these dull, half-famished people were actually capable of an act of violence? Probably not, he said, soothing himself. Still, one had to be on one's guard. One could never know . . .

He began feeling more and more uncomfortable and suddenly he felt something begin to prick at his conscience. If he had received as fat a fee as usual, his conscience would not have awakened, but he was not making a penny from this damned business and had nothing but troubles besides. No wonder that you began having second thoughts under such circumstances.

Blum lighted himself a cigarette, inhaled deeply, but the tobacco suddenly did not taste good any more. Of course, the

people were right. It was a brazen provocation. For a while he simply stared at his plump butcher's hands. It was unheard of, he thought, shaking his head, an act of madness to ask him to perform the abortion here in the contagious room among all these dying people. Wasn't that sheer derision? A devilish form of derision of the hopelessly damned, which was so cruel that one could not have dreamed it up oneself if one had to. Could he justify himself in front of these people by saying that it did not really matter what happened here, since the sick behind the partition were beyond help? Or was the fact that he had to perform this ridiculous abortion under duress, absolutely had to because he was afraid of the policeman, only an excuse? This damned fear he always had, always of someone or something. No, he thought, nothing can justify what you are doing. Not even your fear.

Blum felt that he was in the wrong place. For him the medical profession had not only lost its nimbus but also all seriousness. The black market was still the best thing; nowadays it was the only sensible occupation.

Blum tried to direct his muddled thoughts towards something more concrete, and he started to move the pots about. The water was boiling now. Let it boil a while longer, he thought, then you'll take everything out and let it dry. He considered whether he should change in the meantime. Nonsense. You'll put your coat on later; no one cares what you have on underneath. Don't be so particular today. Everything is confused anyway. He grinned weakly. Of course . . . you will have to wash yourself . . . now, after all the trouble you had with the fire in the stove, once now and again later, shortly before the operation . . . once more thoroughly. At least pretend that you're clean.

Blum now pulled the kettle over, filled it half full of water, dipped his sooty hands into it and began scrubbing them angrily.

A filthy business! The soot wouldn't come off and he had to be careful not to use too much water.

The policeman must think that an abortion like this is child's play, but what did he know of the technical difficulties for which

you had to be prepared. All right—the drudgery with the stove you could take in your stride; also the fact that one had to do the whole dirty business oneself because you had no assistant; that wasn't the worst part either. But there were other difficulties. His private stock of drugs had shrunk to a pitifully low level with time . . . the people in the previous quarters had stolen from him, and not only drugs; instruments had disappeared too, for instance the forceps, of all things the forceps, which he needed so badly today. And then, he had no real table. Yes, damn it, not even that he had. And the lighting—a single lamp. If only Hofer had been here! This way all the responsibility rested on his shoulders alone.

And one other problem: the people had refused to leave the room.

Well, this is going to be fun, Blum thought bitterly.

* * *

As soon as Blum walked over to the long-haired woman, people started to bunch together. Startled at first, he thought that they would interfere and try to prevent the abortion, but then he noticed that he had been wrong. So his suspicions had been unfounded: he really could have thought of that himself. The mob was merely curious. That was all. There was nothing else to it. They were curious and wanted to watch.

"What is going on there?" Ljuba asked. "Look . . . all those people . . . they're all running over to the funny fat man."

"The fat man is a doctor," the cigarette boy replied carelessly; and then he added, a little more softly, "He is operating on the long-haired one."

Ljuba remembered how people popped each others' boils with needles to let the pus flow out when Dr Hofer wasn't there to do it for them, and now she recalled in detail how Deborah had done it when her brother had not been able to bear the gnawing pain any longer.

Her brother lighted himself the second cigarette in succession and said, smiling, "I'm putting that down on the expense account again, but I can promise you—"

"What kind of an operation?" the child interrupted him. "Is he going to pop a boil again?"

The boy laughed with amusement. "The long-haired one doesn't have any boils."

"What *does* she have?"

"Nothing," the boy said, "she's having an abortion." And he immediately regretted what he had said.

"What is that?" the child asked.

"Come, you're starting with your questions all over again."

"Please tell me what that is."

"You don't need to know that yet," the boy said brusquely.

"Please, Misha, tell me."

"You lose a little bit of blood. But you really don't have to know everything."

The child shuddered at the mention of the word "blood," and because the boy noticed this he became friendlier. "That isn't bad," he told her soothingly. "The long-haired one knows what she's doing, you can be sure of that." He pointed to his stomach and explained, "She's only afraid she's going to get something and wants to get rid of it in time." Her brother said something else that Ljuba did not understand either and she lost interest in the conversation. Operations are boring, the child thought. She now ran to the stove to play with Mia, the doll. She was allowed to do this as long as Red was asleep. Of course the child did not dare untie the long string with which the doll was fastened to the stovepipe and take the doll into her arms and go for a walk with her or take her to her bed and cradle her. A long time ago, when she had still been very young, Ljuba had always slept with a doll in her arms; that had been a rag doll with blue eyes and curly black hair which her mother used to place in her bed in the evening before she fell asleep. How wonderful it had been to wake up in the morning with such a marvellous doll.

Why was Mia so ugly? the child thought. And why did Mia have only one eye? And why had Red scratched with a pencil on her face.

The child gave the doll a slight nudge in the ribs and laughed

because the doll dangled back and forth so comically. Now the child turned around, just by accident . . . unsuspecting. And suddenly her eyes widened with horror. Opposite the platform at a spot of wall where there was hardly any light a human figure dangled; it dangled from a clothes hook, swinging back and forth just as comically as Mia, the doll.

The child ran crying to her brother and pointed to the wall. Her brother looked at it for a while, silently smoking. "Someone has hanged himself," he said indifferently. "That can happen. There's no need to bawl about it."

"Why did he hang himself, Misha?"

"I don't know," the boy said. "Perhaps he didn't like it here."

The boy caressed the child. "Go back to the stove," he now said encouragingly, "and play with Mia."

* * *

The crowd had grown so large it was pushing against the door and the stove.

"We can't stay here," Ranek said to Deborah, "otherwise they'll trample on us in a moment."

After they had eaten they had talked and not paid any attention to what was going on around them, but suddenly it was like waking up. They rose and glanced up and down along the platform.

"Sit down beside Moishe for the time being. He won't mind."

"Yes," she said.

"Take the baby."

"Yes, Ranek."

"He'll be glad if you do that for him. He'll let you sit all evening on the platform beside him."

"And you?" she asked.

"Go on!"

"You aren't going to watch this horrible spectacle are you?"

"Go on!" he said.

After she had left, not saying another word, Ranek moved to the back of the crowd. Why not? he thought, shrugging his

shoulders; after all, every spectacle is good as long as it fulfills its purpose—as long as it distracts and one does not have to think.

Ranek came just in time to see a quarrel develop between Blum and the impatient audience, a quarrel that threatened to take on dangerous proportions. Blum was standing on the platform vainly trying to tie a curtain onto the clothesline in order to conceal his patient from the curious onlookers. However, the people would not have it this way. Blum, who was defending himself desperately, was dragged down from the platform and almost choked by the crowd. Not until the curtain had been torn off again did they let Blum proceed.

Ranek could see the naked woman as she anxiously pressed her knees together, shying mutely back before the people until she cowered with her back to the wall.

Blum had recovered his wits by now and, since he realized that his wish for a curtain would remain futile, he said in a voice trembling with rage: "All right, have your fun if you want, you bastards, but shut up and get away from the platform so that I can work." Blum arranged his dishevelled hair, then hung the lamp on a nail just above the edge of the platform. He kept cursing the people a while longer, even though this was no longer necessary—they had had their way and now made room for him. Packed close together, they stood behind him, giggling, gabbing, and pointing lasciviously at the naked woman, who stuck to the wall like a sick fly.

"It's not my fault," Blum said to the woman. "What can I do by myself against this mob?"

"Perhaps we could do it another day?" the woman whispered.

"It'll be the same another day," Blum said.

He lowered his voice. "Don't worry about these walking dead."

The woman nodded but she swallowed anxiously.

"Well, you see it isn't worth getting excited over a few slobs like that." Blum distorted his mouth disdainfully. "They just want to have a little bit of intellectual stimulation before they croak, they want to have something to take along on the way, ha, ha . . ."

Blum grinned at the woman. "Come on now, move a little closer and lie down so that I can get started."

The woman swallowed again but now she obeyed and edged timidly away from the wall.

"How long will it take?" she asked.

"If you do as I say it won't take long. You have to co-operate."

"The platform is so filthy," the woman whispered.

"I'm going to put a clean sheet of linen on it in a moment," he told her soothingly. "And then I'm going to disinfect you. Everything according to the rules, no need to worry." Blum smiled benevolently. "But not just yet, you understand, my child, only when we start."

"What do you want to do now?"

"Shave," Blum said.

"Does that have to be?"

"Of course. Or do you think that we can—"

"But I already shaved myself," the woman whispered.

"You didn't shave yourself well enough, that's all," Blum said.

* * *

He pretended not to hear the giggling behind his back. Now he bent down to get the pitcher with lukewarm water which he had put under the platform. He couldn't find it. Damn it, he thought, absolutely everything disappears in this room. For a while Blum looked vainly on the floor near the old Levy woman's legs. The old woman kicked him a few times. He was just about to give up and fetch more water from the stove when he suddenly saw the pitcher. Panting, he crawled into the semi-darkness and shook the stranger who was lying on his back drinking out of the pitcher.

"That isn't for drinking, damn it!" Blum cursed.

"Excuse me," the stranger said. "I only thought that—"

"Pigs," Blum grumbled fiercely, "god-damned pigs."

When he crawled out from underneath the platform and got on his feet again, he noticed in the gloomy part of the room, on the other wall, the slack figure of the man who had hanged

himself. He stopped as if paralyzed. The pitcher shook in his hands and he almost dropped it. The giggling of the people suddenly resounded raucously in his ears and a sharp pain shot into his temples. All that, however, took only a few seconds, and when he turned back to the woman he had regained control over himself.

Now the woman also noticed the dead man. "Doctor," she stuttered, "did you see that?"

"Don't look," Blum said.

"A man who hanged himself," she whispered. "Oh my God."

Blum repeated, "Don't look," and he added, "It would just irritate you. And you have to hold still now."

* * *

"That takes much too long," whispered a little man with a shiny head who had been standing in front of Ranek and who had now stepped to the side.

"Blum is having his troubles," Ranek said. "He can't find the pitcher again."

"And he's shaved her twice already."

"He still has to wash the soap out from between her legs," Ranek said.

"Too bad one can't see who's stolen the pitcher now. We're standing too far back."

"Yes, that's true. Too far at the back."

"Blum is making a very poor impression," the bald fellow said now. "One could almost say completely confused, don't you think?"

Ranek nodded.

"If he had any idea what a hard time I have standing up," the bald fellow said, "then he'd hurry up a little. I'm about ready to faint."

"In that case I wouldn't stand around here if I were you."

"But I want to see it. You don't have fun like this every day."

"That's no fun," Ranek said. "That's making fun."

"You think Blum is making fun of us?"

"Not of us. He's making fun of the people dying behind the partition. He's making fun of their silent screams for help. He's ridiculing their dying. And that means he's ridiculing everything. Life and death. And God who watches and is silent."

"He's not doing it intentionally," the bald fellow said.

"That doesn't change anything," Ranek said.

The bald fellow nodded indifferently, as if it was all the same to him whether he was being made fun of or not. He nudged Ranek with his elbow and pointed to the back of the room. "Somebody hanged himself," he whispered. "I was going to mention it to you before."

Ranek turned around. He looked intently into the gloom. Then he suddenly said, "I am going to unhook him."

The bald fellow opened his mouth wide.

"Because my sister-in-law sleeps under the clothes hooks," Ranek said.

The bald fellow grinned. "You're worried she's going to have bad dreams?"

"That's right," Ranek said. "I don't want her to have any bad dreams. She is supposed to have good dreams."

Ranek ambled up to the dangling figure. He lifted it off the hook and threw it like a sack on the floor. Because the crowd in front of the door blocked the way to the hallway, he decided to put the dead man temporarily with the typhus cases. He dragged the man up to the partition and tossed him across with one quick movement. He's in good company there for the time being, Ranek thought. He turned around and took up his position at the back of the crowd again.

* * *

The woman was lying on the crumpled white sheet. An empty pail stood crookedly under the edge of the bunk.

Blum had tied up the woman's arms only provisionally, as well as he could. The main problem was the legs. It was important for the dilation and the success of the entire operation that the legs were locked in a spread position. He could have used a couple of

leg elevators . . . the sort he had had in the operating room . . . elevators with bearings and slip rings and wedge bolts. Yesterday he had given a great deal of thought to what he would use in their stead and had finally decided on two high-backed chairs. Procuring such chairs hadn't been easy, either, and transporting them to the sanctuary had been a real drudgery. He had to haul them the long way all by himself.

Now the chairs stood in front of the platform like two silent guards. Blum inspected the backs of the chairs critically. They'll do, he thought, just the right height. You'll hang the woman's legs over them in such a way that the backs of her knees will come to rest on the edges. Then you'll tie her legs to the chairs. Preferably at the joints. That should do it. Blum looked in his pockets for the ropes but then he recalled that he had taken the ropes out of his pockets while he had been busy at the stove during the afternoon. He turned around. Impatiently he pushed a few people aside and made his way to the stove. There was no trace of the ropes. "Gone," he murmured, disappointed, "also gone."

He reflected. Hadn't he just tied up the woman's hands with them? No . . . those had been different ropes . . . thinner ones . . . not the ones he was looking for. Perhaps the fellow who hanged himself used them, he thought, and this idea made him even more furious. He looked around the room, at a complete loss, and then he went back to the platform. He checked his coat. The coat did not have a belt. You could use the belt from your trousers, he thought. But that would take care of only one leg and besides your trousers would fall down. So that was out. Then he remembered the clothesline, and he climbed back on the platform, opened his pocketknife, and cut off two equal lengths of rope.

He went to work at once. He pushed the chair into place, then he grabbed the naked woman, who had edged away again, and dragged her to the edge of the platform. First he tied up the left leg. The chair stood firm; it was a heavy piece of furniture made of oak, solid, imported Biedermeier style. Blum broke into a sweat because the second chair kept tipping over. I knew it,

he thought furiously, a shaky piece made of fence boards, the kind that people build themselves nowadays. Damn it. What was he going to do now? Blum, breathing heavily, turned his fat head backward and inspected his audience. Somebody is going to have to hold the leg, of course!

Blum motioned to someone in the crowd, to someone with a wide hat who looked somehow familiar to him.

Ranek worked his way through the crowd. "If you don't mind," Blum drawled, trying to lend his sour face a few friendly wrinkles, "... only if you really don't mind ... could you hold the leg for a short while? I'm really sorry to have to trouble you, but you must understand ... the circumstances ..."

Blum did not even wait for Ranek's answer. He lifted the leg onto the back of the chair again. "Grab it right here. As soon as I start, you must press the leg firmly against the back of the chair and pull it towards you at the same time so that the chair won't tip over."

"Will you give me a cigarette for that?"

"Of course," Blum said, extracting a pack of Nationales from his pocket. "Here you are," he said politely.

Ranek took three. Blum made no comment.

"Is it going to take long?" Ranek asked.

"Not long," Blum said curtly.

Blum bent down once more and looked under the platform. The old woman was still sitting in the same spot and next to her sat the man who'd drunk out of the pitcher. Exactly underneath the spot where I am working, Blum thought angrily.

"Come out from under there!" he shouted. "Let's go."

"We're staying," the old woman said. "We won't move. This is our place." And the man who had drunk out of the pitcher pursed his lips, juggled his dentures into place, and said, "We're staying. This is our place."

The old woman grinned maliciously. She pointed to the man next to her. "He's new. He has to get used to his place first. You won't be able to budge him. You won't be able to budge me, either."

"Right, Mrs Levy," the man said. "We're staying."

"Do you want it to drip on you?" Blum snarled. "... blood ... do you want the blood to drip down on you?"

"I don't care," the old woman said, "and he doesn't care either. Go to hell! We didn't ask you to come here. And why should we leave? It's our place."

"All right, do as you please," Blum said, and he paid no more attention to the two. He washed his hands once more, dried them, and put on his rubber gloves.

"Hold onto it now!" he said to Ranek.

* * *

At the very beginning of his career one of his patients had died after an abortion; perforation of the uterus while cleaning out the egg and mucous membrane with a curette. Why did he have to think of that just now? At that time it had been his negligence; today the circumstances would be to blame. They couldn't hold him responsible, could they?

The dilation for the purpose of widening and stretching the cervical canal was not as perfect as Blum had at first intended. He had been in too much of a rush. The constant fear of being grazed by one of the lice-ridden people behind him had made him so nervous that he had introduced the Hegar pins only superficially. The absence of his forceps also contributed to his nervousness. In their stead Blum had obtained a pair of flat pliers, padded it with cotton wool, and wound three layers of sanitary gauze around it. Who would have ever thought that he would be using a plumber's tool to hold the upper cervical lip? This was in contradiction of all professional standards ... and even though he could not allow himself to think of it at this moment, he could not get over the fact that his fingers had absolutely no feeling for what they were doing with these substitute forceps.

Blum was fully aware how dangerous it was to penetrate the insufficiently widened uterus with a curette in such bad light; still, he kept working doggedly. His eyes smarted and were watering, and his eyeglasses had become coated with moisture.

The woman fidgeted continually and groaned and Blum was panting angrily because this fellow with the battered hat was doing a lousy job of holding the chair—it jiggled dangerously at times.

While Blum was scraping Ranek turned his head away. All this blood and the musty smell nauseated him. Only later, when Blum was tamponing, did he look up again.

* * *

Janov, a skeleton with a head as grey as ice and a face covered with yellow pimples, was patiently waiting for the chance to negotiate once more with Blum.

You're going to get something else out of that fat bastard, Janov thought, and not chocolate but money, and you'll blackmail him if he refuses.

The curious had dispersed. Blum was standing alone in front of the platform and was getting his things together. He had turned the wick down because the glass cover had become so hot Blum was afraid it might burst.

The woman was still lying on the bloody sheet. He left her like that in the meantime and only took the pail away, even though the blood continued to drip through the sheet and the crack between the boards—a noise like a leaking tap. Blum busied himself near the woman for a while longer; he moved like a restless shadow in front of the flickering lamp and used his good patent-leather shoes to spread the blood evenly on the floor.

Janov waited until Blum finally took the sheet from under the woman's behind, folded it, and tossed it beside the stove. So, that fellow is finished, Janov thought, and stepped up to him.

"The woman has to get off the platform," Janov said. He looked challengingly into Blum's eyes. "She has to get down from there! Or have you forgotten our agreement."

"That's impossible," Blum said, startled.

"I let you have the place only for the operation, not for the whole night," Janov hissed. "Let's go . . . down with her. No nonsense now."

Blum had turned pale. "Impossible," he whispered, "that's

absolutely impossible. You're a human being, aren't you? Or not? You must understand that it is just not possible? That wouldn't be human, would it . . . ? That wouldn't be human." And now he tried to convince Janov that he could not place the woman on the filthy floor in her critical condition, and when Janov refused to see it his way, he declared, "A certain person, an influential person, is going to make inquiries tomorrow . . . about the woman, of course . . . and so I can't lose face."

"What kind of person?"

"Somebody from the police," Blum whispered. "If he should find out that I permitted the woman to be placed on the floor after a business like this . . . Just think of it. What if he finds out. That's what's at stake, you understand? One can't lose face."

Blum gesticulated as if he were at the Bazaar. He importuned Janov, his plump hands created the most ominous visions in the air, at times they grasped desperately at his sweat-covered face, and once he took off his glasses and cleaned them mechanically on his dirty, blood-splattered coat. But Janov just kept laughing impudently into his face. Blum tried to slip a bank note into his hands. It was a one-mark note. Janov suddenly pulled in his head as if he wanted to butt Blum in the stomach. His face started twitching, and then he spat onto the fat hand that held the note, turned around and stormed toward the platform, grabbed the woman by the legs, and tried to drag her down. Blum caught up with him in one leap.

"How much do you want?" he rasped out.

Janov let go of the woman. "Ten marks," he said, "that's for the whole night, everything included."

"Do you know that I haven't earned a penny from the whole abortion?" Blum said, trembling with fury.

"That's none of my business," Janov said, grinning.

Blum paid, cursing.

At this moment someone blew out the lamp.

* * *

Blum did not dare relight the lamp. Evidently the people were

economising on kerosene; in any case, they had at least been decent enough not to extinguish the lamp during the operation.

He took a few timid steps through the dark room. Then he stopped indecisively. No, he thought, you can't lie down on the floor, either... too many infected lice... too dangerous. He remembered: into the corner on the platform. Against the wall. That was still the safest place, and the woman would just have to move over.

Carefully he shuffled back. His hands groped over the edge of the platform. It was still moist and sticky. Blum wiped the bloody boards with his coat, then he pulled the woman away from the wall a bit. It's going to be very tight, he thought, so tight that you'll be lying half on top of her, but he had no choice.

* * *

Blum slept badly. He was tortured by nightmares. He dreamt that two men were dragging him down from the platform. He was powerless, completely defenceless. He wanted to scream but his mouth must have been taped. The men carried him through the dark room without saying a word, lifted him up, and tossed him over the partition. When Blum wanted to crawl back the the typhus patients reached for him... innumerable hands, merciless hands... and they held onto him and would not let go of him.

Let me go! he wanted to scream and couldn't. Let me go! I don't belong to you. I don't belong to you. Let me go back... back!

He awakened. It was still night. At first he did not know where he was. He only felt that he lay half on top of a strange body and that this was a woman's body. His trembling hands groped over the cold flesh, and the coldness of this flesh made him shudder, and then he groped over the hard, blood-encrusted boards and then over a part of the naked wall, but he was only thinking of the nightmare and of the many hands that reached came back to him. You didn't go home last night; you're still in the sanctuary.

Blum sat up with a groan. He felt a violent urge to urinate.

That was probably what had awakened him. Your bladder's caught cold again, he thought plaintively. Where can one take a leak here, damn it? He rubbed his eyes and yawned. Then he lighted the lamp. His sleepy gaze fell on the woman. He looked at her for a long time. He bent down over her face. She was not breathing. She was dead. I knew it, he thought, and he murmured softly to himself, "You old bungler, you damned old bungler."

6

During the course of the next week the epidemic spread to the other side of the partition. There were typhus cases lying all over the room, and it was difficult to avoid touching them. But what was even more horrible were the corpses over which you kept stumbling. At first people had intended to move the corpses out of the room, but then it had turned out that no one was willing to lay a hand on them. The people who were still able to walk moved out. They dispersed in all directions. Some were lucky and found an abode somewhere in the over-populated city of ruins. But most of them went and hid in the bushes. For a time—before they could think of returning to the sanctuary—they had little choice but to sleep on the wet autumn ground. They were not equipped to live outdoors and their only remaining hope was that winter would not set in soon.

Ranek and Deborah had not left until the others were long since gone. They had not wanted to give up and had waited determinedly until the very last hour. Ranek had hurriedly found two sacks for them. They had hung them over their shoulders and now, while they were walking down the street in the direction of the Bazaar, they were glad that they had the sacks to protect them against the cold wind.

"Do you think we'll find a place?"

She looked questioningly into his determined face.

"Yes," he smiled. "I'm positive."

"Then it's just as well that we didn't go into the bushes. I've always had a dread of the bushes."

Ranek looked at Deborah. "We'll find a place," he said confidently. "And we're only going to move into a place that keeps out the wind and the rain. That's what we decided and that's what we're going to do."

"Yes, Ranek."

"Anyone who goes into the bushes loses his claim on life. Nothing matters to him any more. And someone to whom nothing matters any more is lost. You aren't lost as long as you still make some demands on life."

"Yes, Ranek," she said again.

They had tried visiting Dvorsky once more, but Dvorsky had not let them in for one moment, the reason for his refusal being that they would bring infected lice with them. Now they wanted to look up a few other people with whom they were acquainted—from the street and the Bazaar. Perhaps one could strike a bargain with one of them? And if not, well, in that case they would simply go from house to house, from door to door.

Ranek was carrying a package on his back. There was meat inside it—boiled dog. Catching the dog had increased his self-confidence considerably. After all, one wasn't at a complete loss for ideas; somehow or other one always found a plan and a way out of the black dead-end street of hopelessness. Yesterday Deborah had said to him, "Ranek, we won't have time to go to the soup kitchen as long as we are looking for a place to stay; we won't even have time to look through the dustbins in the Pushkinskaja or to stand around the Bazaar. We have to take something along with us, at least enough for two or three days." And he had answered, "Don't worry. We'll take something." And then he had gone into the yard and had looked for the shaggy yellow dog that always scrounged there. Quite a few people had tried to catch the dog, but it had always been quicker than the weak legs of the emaciated and run off barking when someone gave chase.

Ranek had lured the dog into the hallway . . . by means of a long rope with a few potato peels at the end. The dog hesitated close to the entrance and lifted its snout up to him, but then it had decided to trust him after all and padded slowly into the hallway. Ranek had quickly tossed his jacket over the dog's head and then bound him with the rope, and later on he had slaughtered him behind the house.

Deborah was carrying a package too. She was carrying it on her arm, carefully and lovingly. Deborah's package possessed, at least in Ranek's opinion, no practical value whatsoever. Perhaps, he thought, he would still be able to persuade her to leave it somewhere in the gutter. He regarded the baby with violent antipathy. Now he remembered how Moishe had handed the baby to her and begged her to take it with her. That had happened the day before yesterday when the typhus had seized Moishe; he, who had belonged to the fittest in the sanctuary, had been knocked down like a bull. And now the child was with Deborah.

The child was wrapped up warmly. It kept as quiet as if it were already capable of intelligent thought and aware that its existence depended solely upon Deborah's good will and care.

7

Today was Sunday. In the village on the Rumanian side of the river the church bells were chiming, sending their distant message across the Dniester. A very dreary Sunday even though it wasn't raining. The clouds were hanging low, the way they had been hanging since this morning, without appearing to move at all. One had the impression that nature had become fickle and couldn't decide whether to cry or laugh.

A whole week had passed since the exodus from the sanctuary. The corpses were piling up inside, but the big cart still hadn't

come to take them away. The door was locked, but the window was open now. It had been closed, but one of the typhus patients, finding the smell of decay unbearable, must have pulled himself up with his last remaining strength and pushed it open. And now the putrid smell wafted into the yard and contaminated the entire surrounding area.

The yard was completely desolate, as empty as the latrine. Not even Dvorsky and the people from the cellar used it any longer. Red was the only one who still came by every so often. He was a man of habits and he was drawn back to the vicinity of the lonely house as if by magic. He would stand for hours at the entrance and stare into the hallway, thinking sadly of the familiar spot under the stove.

Red had also come back today. But he received a visitor—a second person stepped into the yard from the street—the old Levy woman. For a while she stopped silently near the fence as if she still found the great silence incomprehensible. Then she shuffled slowly up to the fence and called out. She didn't call out loud at all, but in the usually quiet yard her voice sounded shrill. Red flinched. Then he turned around and recognized her.

* * *

"I thought you were inside," Red said with a weak grin, pointing to the room with the dead.

"No. I just got out in time, as you can see." The old woman triumphantly stroked her dishevelled hair, smoothing it gently. She was wearing a warm shawl around her neck and shoulders which he had never seen her wear before and which she seemed to have inherited.

"A fine shawl," Red said.

"You like it?"

"Yes, very much. But I have something better still."

He showed her Moishe's old wollen sweater, which he wore under his jacket. Moishe had struggled and kicked when Red had undressed him; he had roared and bawled like a child and he did not stop until Red knocked him out cold. He hadn't much liked doing it, but, after all, it wasn't his fault that Moishe refused

to do the sensible thing. Later on he had disinfected the sweater.

"You like it?" it was his turn to ask now.

The old woman nodded. Then she said abruptly, "The authorities know very well what's going on here."

"Who told you?"

"Seidel . . . Seidel told me. Seidel notified the authorities himself, not in person of course . . . by way of a third person . . . you understand . . . he demanded that they send the cart to take the corpses away."

"That's something."

"He says that there's no point in keeping the epidemic secret now that we've moved out of the sanctuary and because the smell is going to notify the authorities anyway . . . and that . . . the corpses have to be taken out of the room."

"It's high time," Red said.

"Of course Seidel knows that we can't move back in because the police are going to keep an eye on the place for a while; the story has to die down first. I think Seidel only did it because of the businessman's widow. He had an affair with her and he doesn't want her to lie around up there. Dead people belong underground, right?"

Red nodded indifferently.

"Of course he has no idea whether the woman is dead already," the old woman sighed, "but he must have thought she would be by the time the big cart got here."

Red again nodded in agreement.

"Let's hope the cart gets here soon," the old woman said softly.

"That's going to take longer than you think," Red said. "It could even take a few weeks."

"You think? A couple of weeks?"

"Certainly. It's only logical. Just think: the cart that usually comes by here is practically always full or almost full and can't take on a whole load. The sanctuary needs a wagon all its own, a completely empty one, a special cart, and special carts are in short supply, very short supply."

"I didn't think of that."

"And one probably won't be enough."

"Yes, that's really a problem."

"Not my problem. I don't give a shit. Or do you think my hair is going to turn grey over it?"

"No, not yours, that's for sure."

"Well, then," Red grumbled.

* * *

Now they stepped into the hallway. A few rats darted along the wall and fled under the staircase. The old woman stumbled on in front of Red. Suddenly she stopped short.

"Somebody's lying there!" she exclaimed. "A man . . . under the stairs! Who . . . who is that?" She gasped, "My God, that's where my son died."

"And his brother," Red said, grinning.

"His brother?"

"Ranek's brother." Red laughed softly and then he took the arm of the trembling old woman and pulled her closer to the stairs.

"Can't you recognize him?" he asked derisively.

"He's lying on his stomach," the old woman said hesitantly. "I can't see his face."

"He's wearing a beaten-up hat," Red hissed. "You still don't know who that is?"

"Ranek," the old woman whispered, "Ranek."

Ranek did not move. It was difficult to tell whether he had noticed them or not. He was lying there as stiffly as a corpse. His back shimmered through his torn jacket—a naked, dirty grey patch.

"I thought Ranek had moved out," the old woman said.

"He did move. But yesterday he came back. Alone."

"What's the matter with him?"

"Typhus." Red grinned again. "He must have caught it just before he left, probably didn't even know it."

Red slowly crushed a louse on his jacket collar; he spat on the finger with the crushed louse on it and wiped it off on his trousers. Then he pushed the old woman away from the stairs and stepped with her back into the yard.

"The story would interest you," he gaggered, and while he told the woman what he knew about Ranek his dull bug eyes began to glisten oddly.

"It happened yesterday afternoon," he began. "I'd just stolen an ear of corn from one of those bastards in the bushes. I wanted to make a fire and roast the corn, but the wood I was using had been in the mud and wouldn't burn. So I told myself, Red, why don't you go over to the sanctuary and get yourself a few decent fence boards; that's damned good wood." Red laughed hollowly. "I was just in the process of breaking off a board when I discovered Ranek. He surprised the hell out of me. The fellow was lying in the middle of the yard. Perhaps he's dead, I thought. Or perhaps he isn't. I went up to him and gave him a good kick in the back. That always helps. The fellow came to again. He couldn't get up. He just lay there like a rock, giving me a strange look, you know . . . real strange. And he couldn't really talk, either, but, of course, I helped him a little."

Red interrupted himself. He lowered his big head as if he had to reflect, and for a while he looked at his large dirty toes that jutted out of his foot rags. You need new rags, he thought, it doesn't look good like that . . . the toes aren't supposed to show on a living person. No, they're not supposed to . . . you'll take Ranek's rags. Of course . . . they're still in good shape. Ranek always wore good rags on his feet. Red moved his toes unobtrusively and then he laughed once more, again softly, and spat on the ground.

"Go on . . ." the old woman said impatiently. "Go on tell me the rest."

"I gave him some water to drink," Red said slowly. "Ranek was grateful to me for that. He couldn't stand me back in the sanctuary days, but at that moment he was grateful to me. And I gave him as much water as he wanted, because I was curious and because I thought the water would loosen his tongue. I wanted to know what he had experienced, how it happened that someone in his condition had made it all the way back from town. As I said, he couldn't really talk any more but I made sense out of his stammering . . . They'd been looking for a

place to stay, Ranek and the young woman, his sister-in-law. What's her name?"

"Deborah?" the old woman said.

"Oh yes, Deborah," Red murmured "I've a bad memory for certain names, you know. . . . The two of them tried all sorts of things, but it was too crowded for them to find a place. When it got late and started to get dark, they tried the place of an acquaintance of his—a shoemaker who'd thrown them out once before that same afternoon; well, you know, Ranek is stubborn, he doesn't let himself be turned away just like that. Ranek went by himself and let the woman wait for him downstairs. But it turned out badly for him this time; he got a terrible beating; the people threw him down the stairs and poured filthy water over him."

The bug eyes glowed gleefully, their gaze caressing the old woman's face, which was distorted with hatred. How she must hate Ranek, Red thought. She hates him since she heard what he did to her son. Well, that's understandable.

"Deborah had a child with her," Red went on. "Moishe's baby. A crazy idea of hers, to save the child and take it along simply because it is helpless. But she was always a little batty."

The old woman nodded. "She's a little screwy," she said with conviction. "Deborah's not quite right in her head." She asked, "What happened after the beating?"

"Ranek was so furious he made the baby responsible for everything, which, of course, was nonsense, the two of them wouldn't have found a place even without the baby. Ranek wanted to strangle the baby and fling it in the gutter, but Deborah wouldn't let him come near the child. When he realized that she wouldn't let him do it, he left the baby in peace. . . . That night they went into the back yard of the brothel. There's a cellar there. I happen to know it. It's a public lavatory. I used to go there myself when I was in the vicinity. It's too cold to sleep in the yard now and a dog couldn't bear it down in the cellar, but you can always spend a night on the cellar steps if you're really hard up."

"Was there room?"

"There was no room during the summer, but there is now, lots of people died or moved, don't know exactly what happened. In any case they found a place there."

"Can't we go there too? It's better than the bushes."

"Better not. I don't trust the place. I've heard the whores protect the people in the cellar but you know it's no fun to live practically next door to so many police and soldiers. That's not for me. You couldn't get me to live there if you paid me."

"I suppose you know what you're doing," the old woman said.

Red nodded. Then he went on with his story: "The people in the cellar accepted Ranek and Deborah. The matter was settled. That's the way things are; nobody asks any questions as long as there's enough room. Nothing went wrong the first few days, even though Ranek collapsed shortly after they moved in, but that didn't trouble anyone; that happens every day and doesn't mean much. But when the people found out that he had typhus, they made a stink. The people told Deborah that she and the child could stay but that Ranek had to get out altogether. Of course, Ranek refused. He was beaten up again. He couldn't walk any more. And so they dragged him out of the yard and threw him on the street... Deborah stayed with him. She helped him get up and tried to lead him away so at least he wouldn't lie right in front of the brothel, but he didn't get very far and collapsed again... Ranek was lying on the kerb. Just imagine. On the kerb of the Pushkinkaja. With that crowd there. And the people walking by didn't even see him; they never see something like that. Who bothers to look if something's lying on the street... a dog, a cat, or a man? He lay there like a sick animal with the traffic trampling all over him; the traffic will trample anything to death unless it crawls on. And where could he have crawled to? It was noon and the people were lounging around the doorways; no one would have let him in anywhere. He wanted to crawl onto the street, but there was the danger of the wagon wheels running over him, crushing him. So Ranek lay down in the gutter. That was still the safest place. Deborah left him there for the time being and rushed back into the cellar, she was so desperate, to beg the people to have pity; she believed

firmly that the people would give in and accept Ranek again."

Red kept scratching his behind. The more he got into the thick of his story the stronger the itch he felt in his guts. His bug eyes glowed. The old woman, however had her eyes fixed on his big hands.

"Why don't you stop your scratching," the old woman hissed. "What happened then? Tell me! I want to know. What happened then?"

"Just after Deborah had left the big cart came by. You know, don't you, they also pick up the half-dead now? The driver stopped where Ranek was lying . . . they're experts . . . they always know right away. They made short shrift of him and loaded him on the cart. He travelled quite a way. Afterward he pulled himself together once more and worked his way from under the pile of corpses. Well, you know how it is—fear lends you superhuman strength. Ranek was lucky. The cart rumbled by somewhere near here; had to make a detour for some reason, probably wasn't full and wanted to pick a few more corpses out of the ditches." Red pointed vaguely in a direction. "Down there at the intersection Ranek let himself drop off. He managed to get as far as the sanctuary."

"Don't you think it's strange that Ranek crawled into the hole under the stairs of all places, where my son and Fred used to lie . . . just as if he could only croak only there, under the stairs?"

"No, that's purely accidental," Red said. "Ranek had a shivering fit and he didn't want to keep lying in the yard. He wanted to crawl to the landing in front of the door, because it's warmer there than outside in the wind. He crawled as far as the hallway but couldn't get up the stairs. And that's why he crawled into the hole."

* * *

The two went back into the hallway.

"I have to go up to the room!" Red said suddenly. He left the dumbfounded old woman standing there and shuffled toward the stairway. Then he gathered up his courage and went

upstairs. The old woman below shouted, "For God's sake, come back!" But he did not listen to her; he did not want to lose this opportunity of getting his last possessions: Mia, the doll, the necklace with three teeth, and an old scarf that also hung over the stovepipe. He had forgotten to take them during his last few panic-stricken minutes before he left the room and so far had not had the courage to go up again. He would open the door only a crack—it was too dangerous to go inside—and he would fish out the things carefully with his hand.

When he reached the landing he noticed that the door wouldn't open. "Damn it," he cursed. "What's the matter now?" The corpses blocked the door from inside and he would have to throw his whole weight against the door to break it open. He was blind with anger. He felt the corpses were playing him a dirty trick, as if they had intentionally collapsed right by the door so that he could not get back into the room. "Damn it!" he cursed. "You bastards. I'm going to show you that you can't pull a trick like that on me . . ." And he was just about to fling himself against the door—he was that furious—when he suddenly heard the old woman calling, and stopped.

"What do you want?"

"I just want to know who you're talking to up there?" the old woman asked.

"With no one," Red grunted.

"With the dead," the voice from below giggled.

"Yes, with the lousy dead," he shouted back furiously. He stood indecisively in front of the door and thought, Don't do it, better not do it; you'll get your things some other time. Was he suddenly afraid of seeing the room again? There's no need to look, is there? he thought. Just stick your arm inside through the crack and don't look.

Suddenly he couldn't do it any more. He hammered with his fists against the door once again.

Then he turned back.

"Why didn't you go in?" the old woman asked when he stood beside her again.

"Because I changed my mind," he answered curtly.

"You wanted to get your things, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"The doll especially?"

"Yes, especially the doll."

The old woman giggled derisively. "How could you have been so foolish as to leave Mia behind?"

"I don't know, I just forgot."

"It was a nice keepsake." She laughed heartily. "From your daughter, wasn't it? The one they threw into the Dniester?"

Red raised his hand as if he wanted to slap the old woman's venomous mouth, but he didn't; he turned around briskly, rushed up to the steps, and vented his rage on Ranek. He stepped on his back a few times, gasping, cursing; he stepped on him until he stubbed a toe and had to stop. The old woman had sneaked after him. She was no longer laughing. "Good," she said, "good, he should be trampled to death . . . a pig like that." She bent down and stuck her head into the hole because she found it strange that Ranek hadn't screamed . . . he hadn't moved, either . . . he hadn't reacted at all, but when she straightened up again after a moment she said, "He's still breathing."

"Yes, I know." Red's voice became less loud now. "Ranek was carrying a bundle on his back. The bundle was so well tied that he didn't lose it even when he was on the cart. There was meat inside. I took it away from him; he doesn't need it any more."

"What kind of meat?"

"I don't know, meat. Deborah and he hadn't eaten much of it; it was a huge piece, looked like lamb, but the head was missing and the legs."

"Where is it now?"

"I hid it," Red said secretively.

"Will you give me some?"

"Kiss my arse."

"I just mean," the old woman said hesitantly, "because . . . because Ranek still owes me something."

Red laughed and shook his head, and then he said again, "Kiss my arse."

Now he knelt down by the hole; he listened to Ranek's death

rattle for a while, exactly as the old woman had done. Then he crawled a bit farther on. His big hands felt Ranek's foot rags. You didn't want to do it yesterday, he thought, because there was too much life left in him. But now you can do it. Of course. The old woman is even going to enjoy that. Ranek doesn't deserve any better.

Phlegmatically he untied the strings and rolled them up, and then he carefully unwrapped the rags. He did not look long at the naked grey feet. Feet, he thought, feet like all other feet.

Then he crawled back to the other end of the wall, lifted the hat off the floor, and held it up into the wan light. Grinning, he said to the old woman, "I almost forgot about the hat."

"Do give me a piece of meat," the old woman begged, "do give me some, do give me a piece."

8

The noonday sun stood high above the muddy Pushkinskaja; its rays, however, lacked energy and only aroused a painful longing for warmth in the people. The puddles were iridescent; you could see the colours of the rainbow in them. A child was playing in front of the entrance to a house. She was playing with the soft, wavy hair of a woman's corpse that had been tossed out of the window in the morning. The corpse hadn't burst; it had been a first-floor window through which she had made her last exit, one of those comfortable contrivances whose sole purpose seemed to be that one could lean against the embrasure and say hello to the people outside and talk to them about the weather. This very moment a bald-headed man leaned out and poured a pailful of water into the street. The child, who was still nimble, leaped aside, laughing, and was pleased at how

well the man had aimed : the corpse had been turned over by the impact of the water that had splashed sideways against its ribs, a movement that corpses usually do not make. The child waited. She thought, Is she going to get up now? It was only logical, if someone could turn over why shouldn't that person also be able to get up on her feet? However, nothing of the sort occurred and the disappointed child picked up a flat stone and threw it angrily against the stiff body.

Again a bald-headed man appeared at the window, but it was not the same man who had poured the water. "Come inside, Lina !" he shouted down to the child.

"No, Daddy, I don't want to go inside," the child called. "I want to play."

"Well," the man screamed, "Do I have to come down? Just you wait and see what'll happen then."

"All right, I'm coming," the child called anxiously, and then she hurriedly disappeared in the house.

Now a fat woman came to the window.

"Why don't you go for a walk with Lina?" she asked nicely. "A bit of sun wouldn't do you any harm at all."

"You're absolutely right," the bald-headed fellow replied. "I was thinking of that myself, but you know how it is—the streets are wet and muddy."

"Sensitive feet?"

"No, not that; new shoes, which I don't want to ruin."

The woman nodded sympathetically. Then she whispered into his ear, "They discharged a few more police today. Did you hear about it too?"

The bald-headed man nodded. "Yes, I heard about it."

"You watch, they're going to discharge more and more of them. And do you know what that means?"

"Of course," the bald-headed man said, "it means that the situation in the ghetto has completely calmed down."

A pair of lovers stood on the other side of the street. They were talking excitedly with each other. Now they ambled slowly across the street; a young man with a freckled, still relatively smooth face and old woman whose face looked like a death

mask. The old woman held tenderly onto the young man's arm and waddled alongside him.

* * *

Red and the old Levy woman saw each other frequently since their recent encounter in the empty sanctuary yard. Their mutual loneliness may have been responsible for this situation, as they were both suffering from this condition more than ever before. Red looked changed since he wore Ranek's hat; perhaps because one could no longer see his shock of red hair, to which one was so used and that seemed to characterize him. The hat fitted Red better than it had Ranek. It was not too large for him and suited him perfectly in every respect, as if it had been designed for him all along.

When Red caught sight of the corpse under the window he stopped and murmured admiringly. "Those breasts . . . look . . . those breasts . . ."

"As if they still contained mother's milk," the old woman said; "what a shame."

Red nodded. He pursed his lips, let the spittle accumulate in his mouth, which was watering, but did not spit and swallowed his feelings. The old woman pulled him quickly away from the corpse and whispered something lascivious to him, unbuttoning the upper part of her dress and pointing to her own breasts. Red nodded again; he was laughing softly now . . . the bug eyes without eyelashes protruded a little out of their sockets and suddenly gave the impression of two glass buttons.

"I don't usually offer myself to a man just like this," the old woman said, "but because it's you . . ."

"Because you want to get a piece of Ranek's meat," he said, grinning.

"Ranek owes it to me," the old woman insisted.

"There isn't much left of it," Red said evasively.

"Please . . ." the old woman said, and she repeated obstinately, "Ranek owes it to me."

"You women are all the same," Red said angrily; "you're always ready to make love a business, as if something like that is a business, you're always ready when there's a chance to get something from a man." And he thought to himself, Even when they look like old cardboard and smell of rancid butter . . . even then they still think of making a profit. "Damn it," he said, "I don't give a shit whether Ranek owes you anything or not."

The old woman said no more. She only ogled him from the side. She didn't really believe that he was hot for a woman, but she knew that the long period of abstinence had roused his curiosity. She would change his mind yet. He would give in. Thinking of the meat made her go faint. She clutched his arm more firmly and tried not to think of it. But in vain. She suddenly felt her whole body trembling.

"Do you think Ranek is dead by now?" Red asked.

"I don't know," she said with a choking voice and thought of the meat.

"He won't be dead yet," Red said reflectively, "he hasn't been lying under the stairs a whole week . . . and a tough fellow like him doesn't croak that fast." He continued, "It's only been four days."

The old woman calmed down in the meantime. Don't collapse now, she thought, of all things don't collapse now; you'll get some good grub tonight; Red won't drop you. She wrapped her warm shawl, which the wind had loosened, more tightly around her neck, blinked into the pale sunshine and felt her self-confidence increasing.

"How terribly cold it was last week," she said, "and today we're having brisk, sunny weather as if it were early October. Isn't it astonishing at this time of year?"

"Yes, of course," Red said distractedly.

"Perhaps it's a sign from heaven?" the old woman said, smiling, "a sign from heaven like the peace that's come over the town."

"Perhaps," Red murmured.

When they reached the end of the Pushkinskaja, the old woman whispered, "Funny that you don't see the cigarette boy

around any more; he used to stand here all the time. And little Ljuba . . . such a sweet girl, she was, right?"

"They stayed behind in the sanctuary."

"I didn't know that," the old woman said, taken aback, and she added quickly, "After all, one can't keep track of everyone who remained behind and who didn't."

Red pulled her grumpily across the Bazaar. They proceeded to walk in the direction of the sanctuary. Suddenly Red started to walk more hurriedly, as if he were afraid he would miss something important.

"Why are you in such a rush all of a sudden?"

"Perhaps Ranek has croaked in the meantime?" Red said, whose suspicious nature was not at ease with its own previous speculations. "If that's true and somebody should get the idea to steal the teeth before I—"

"Nonsense." The old woman laughed out loud "Ranek's teeth? He had just a few rotten stumps left."

"It's not nonsense. You know, Ranek sometimes behaved as if he had some sort of secret."

"A secret?"

Red nodded. "I would bet anything that there is a gold filling somewhere in one of his rotten stumps."

"You could have checked that by now," the old woman said mockingly

Red did not slow down. His face was twitching nervously. The old woman tottered alongside him, gasping; she was scolding him continually: "Don't walk so fast, don't walk so fast."

* * *

Red had not let her hold him back and had outdistanced her; she had lost sight of him

When she arrived in the sanctuary yard later on, she saw Red rummaging around the scrap heap.

"Well, finally," he exclaimed.

The old woman shuffled up to him. "Your legs are still young, that's all," she said, grinning.

"Do you remember where Ranek hid the hammer? I've been looking but I can't find it."

"It's bound to be under the scrap heap somewhere. I would go on looking for it there if I were you."

She asked, "Is Ranek dead?"

Red nodded. He did not tell her that he had seen Deborah in the hallway. All he said was, "I wanted to check his teeth but couldn't get his mouth open. Have to do it with the hammer."

9

The old woman entered the hallway of the sanctuary. Because she came out of bright sunlight her eyes did not immediately become used to the gloom inside. She fumbled her way forward, both arms extended. The mud in the hallway had not dried even though it had not rained during the last two days. It squished under her feet as if she were walking across a soaking moss-covered heath—a soft gurgling noise. Not until she touched the bannister did she notice the figure of the woman who was cowering silently beside the corpse. She did not recognize her at once, but suddenly she knew it could only be Deborah.

Deborah slowly turned her head. Her hair had not been combed for a long time and fell in thick strands across her pale face.

"Too late," she whispered, "too late."

"You couldn't have helped him, not even if you had come earlier," the old woman said coldly. She leaned sluggishly against the bannister. He had it coming, she thought venomously, he had it coming to him.

Suddenly it seemed to the old woman as though fog were being blown into the hallway, and she felt it becoming dark

again; the cowering figure became less distinct; the ice-grey fog enveloped it completely; but that probably was only the fault of her dim, aching eyes. You're getting old, she thought, there's nothing one can do against that . . . and all those months sitting by a kerosene lamp in the evening didn't help your eyes either.

Now the woman heard a soft whimpering sound. It seemed to rise up out of the wet earth, ghostlike, unreal, as if the earth had a voice of its own. Then she noticed that it was only the baby. It had slipped from Deborah's lap and now lay beside the corpse.

Well, isn't that something, the old woman thought, astonished; so she's still dragging it around with her.

"I looked for Ranek for days," Deborah said to her now. "I looked for him, but how was I supposed to know that Ranek would come back here; no one would have thought that."

"It was his fate to croak under the stairs," the old woman hissed maliciously, "like his brother and like my son . . . my son . . . under these damned stairs; yes, he was destined to, believe me."

The old woman began laughing softly; she shook the creaking bannister and bent her head back, her toothless mouth agape.

Deborah kept quiet. She waited for the old woman's laughing fit to pass; then she said laconically: "Ranek was murdered. Do you know who did it?"

The old woman flinched. "What . . . how do you dare . . . Ranek was very sick. He had typhus. You know that yourself."

"Ranek had meat with him," Deborah said. "It was stolen from him, otherwise the sack with the rest of the meat would still be here; but it's gone. Ranek wouldn't have died as quickly if he had had something to eat."

"Nonsense. What's that supposed to mean: wouldn't have died as quickly?"

"Not before the onset of the typhus crisis," Deborah said softly. "I have kept track of how many days he has been sick. He can't have had his crisis yet."

"Perhaps he got some complication with his brain," the old woman suggested uncertainly. "That's supposed to be in some

way connected with typhus, or perhaps it was only the wet ground . . . and that killed him prematurely; that's possible, isn't it?"

"No. He died of hunger. I know it. He died of hunger."

The old woman twisted her mouth derisively. "How do you know what he died of? Nowadays not even the doctors know any longer what people die of."

"He was murdered! Someone simply let him starve to death."

"Don't think about it any more," the old woman said consolingly. "What does it matter what he died of? Dead is dead. Everybody rots the same way." Involuntarily she bent forward; she had let go of the bannister, and her wrinkled hands groped over Deborah's face. "You cried," she murmured.

"I didn't cry," Deborah said softly.

"Yes, you did," the old woman said. "Your face is still wet from it."

"I prayed to God that he would at least let him stay alive. If you only knew how I prayed. . . ."

"I know . . . I know. . . . You prayed for him. But you can see yourself what use it was."

"I didn't want to remain alone," Deborah whispered.

"Nobody wants to remain alone," the old woman said coldly.

"Ranek was good to me," Deborah whispered.

The old woman nodded. He was nothing but a degenerate; she thought, but one had to admit one thing: he was good to Deborah.

"Ranek loved you," the old woman said thoughtfully. "He never admitted it but I knew it all along, Deborah." She tried to smile but she didn't succeed. "I knew it," she said, "except I could never understand why because he was someone whose faith had been destroyed, the faith in God, Deborah, and the faith in mankind, someone to whom nothing was sacred any more . . . and because I told myself: someone like that isn't capable of loving any more. But Hofer was right after all."

"Right?" Deborah whispered. "What did Hofer say?"

"Only the dead can't love any more . . . that's what he said."

The old woman strained her eyes to squint over Deborah's

head into the black hole under the stairs, and she remembered again what Ranek had done to her son when he had lain dying and defenceless in the hallway, but then she also thought of how good Ranek had been to Deborah, and these two simultaneous thoughts created a peculiar confusion in her, and she no longer knew whether she should damn or forgive the dead man.

"I watched you two many times," she then said slowly to Deborah. "Especially during the last days in the sanctuary. You used to sit by the window in the evening . . . and sometimes . . . when it got late . . . you fell asleep in Ranek's arms." The old woman grinned pensively. "Ranek didn't dare get up I can remember. He sat there quietly only his hands moving softly. His hands stroked your hair, Deborah. They caressed it again and again. Time and again. And so I said to myself : you would never have thought that bastard capable of so much tenderness. And I told myself : Deborah is happy. And I wondered a little, you know. But then I told myself : there's happiness even among us. There's the happiness of somebody who's freezing and who finds a warm blanket. And there's the happiness of somebody who's hungry who finds a piece of bread. And there's the happiness of the lonely who find love."

The old woman said nothing else now, even though there were many things she would have liked to say so as to pass the time before Red would come with the hammer; but she knew that Deborah was no longer listening. Deborah had crawled even closer to the corpse and her knees were touching his jacket. The old woman heard her whispering, but she was whispering so softly she could not understand any of it. Perhaps Deborah was praying, she thought. Or perhaps she wasn't. Perhaps she is only making a last confession, something that she absolutely has to tell the dead man because she couldn't before . . . and if it is like that, then it is none of your business.

The child had been whimpering the whole time. Now it was quiet. It had fallen asleep gently beside the corpse. Deborah took it into her arms and got up. She wanted to walk past the old woman, but the latter suddenly blocked her way. "Why don't you leave the baby here?" she screeched. "Who cares if it croaks.

Later on when the cart comes I'll tie it to Ranek with some rope, so they don't miss it Well, what do you say?"

"No," Deborah said harshly. "No."

"Get some sense. The war will be over someday. You may be able to make it alone. With the child . . . never."

"I promised Moishe I would save the child," Deborah said, and stared flabbergasted into the old woman's face as though perceiving the embodiment of sin in it.

"Promised," the old woman mimicked her derisively, "promised . . . promised to save the child, as if you could buy yourself something with that. How stupid can you be!"

The old woman spat disdainfully on the sack in which the child was wrapped. Deborah's gone a little screwy, she thought. Of course. You only recently said to Red, "Deborah's not quite right in the head."

"It's nothing but a dirty worm," she hissed, "a dirty worm that doesn't do anybody any good."

"Please let me go. Please let me go now."

"Listen to me! I don't mean you any harm. What you're doing is madness, utter madness."

For a second Deborah considered pushing the old woman aside and running off, to get out as quickly as possible, but suddenly she felt herself becoming ill. There was the familiar roaring in her head, her knees threatened to cave in, and without really wanting to she took a few tottering steps toward the staircase and sat down, exhausted.

The old woman did not leave her side. "You poor thing," she whispered, and her voice contained a trace of pity, "you poor thing. Where are you planning to go with the child? Into the bushes?"

"Not into the bushes," Deborah breathed.

"Then we probably won't see each other again," the old woman said, and now she grinned with a distorted mouth. "Or perhaps we will see each other again, what?"

"Perhaps," Deborah said tonelessly.

"Somewhere," the old woman said, "who knows . . . perhaps one of these days in the sanctuary, on the street, or in the

cemetery? But there aren't any real cemeteries any more either, are there?" She giggled for a while. And then she wiped her weary old eyes with her dirty hands, because they were starting to run again. The damned fog, she thought . . . the damned fog . . . and you would have liked to see Deborah's face so much once more, her face, of which Ranek used to say it looked like the face of a saint. A pity she's so crazy.

The old woman suddenly flinched, and Deborah lifted her head. They could hear steps in the hallway. Red was coming back. He had found the hammer. He was holding it in his right hand, dangling it back and forth.

Red paid no attention whatsoever to Deborah. He only had eyes for the corpse; then he turned abruptly around. A light seemed to flash in his bug eyes. He dragged the old woman away from the stairway and pushed her against the cracked wall.

"What are you doing?" the old woman said.

"I'm in no rush about Ranek's teeth now," Red said, grinning, sticking the rusty hammer calmly under his jacket, "I was only impatient before on the street, you know; sometimes one bursts with impatience, but Ranek won't run away from me now."

He lifted the old woman's dress and his hairy hands felt hungrily for her naked, dried-up skin. "I'll give you the eat afterwards," he laughed. Then he ripped off her dress with the quick movement and pushed her on the ground. The old man fought back desperately "Not here!" she gasped. "Not here . . . not beside the corpse."

Deborah walked silently by the couple that was rolling convulsively on the ground, knotted up into each other like beasts. Her throat was parched, her whole body ached as though it was a single large open wound. How low man had sunk! How low he had been brought. How he had been debased. She wanted to look back to see Ranek for the last time, but she was unable to. Red's laughter resounded hoarsely through the hallway and it suddenly seemed to her as if the corpse under the stairway were also joining in the laughter.

She walked in a daze across the empty yard; she felt as if she were dreaming a nightmare with open eyes. The wind was blow-

ing from the street against the rotten, weather-beaten fence; that was the familiar noise of the rattling, trembling boards, and vis-à-vis, from the railway station, where they were still building, there rang out the heavy clanging of the sledge hammers and the screeching of the band saws.

She stopped hesitantly on the street. Where to? she thought. Where to now? Then she had a thought and she turned off to the right.

* * *

She had the feeling she was walking through a great wilderness. In her mind she could hear the corpse laugh again, and it seemed to her as if his eyes were looking reproachfully out of the grey mud of the street. But after a while the apparition vanished, the laughter died out, and the eyes in the mud disappeared also and tortured her no more. All that was left then was the wind and the loneliness. I'm not out of my mind, she thought; I knew it . . . I knew it. "God, help me go on now," she whispered fervently. "Don't let me think of Ranek now. There isn't anything more I can do for him. I can't even pay to have his body taken away from here. And I have to have a clear head now. I still have the child with me. And I have to find a place to stay tonight. And there are so many other vital things I have to think of now."

The child moved sleepily in her arms. This slight movement made her look up from the street and for some seconds she gazed spellbound at the tiny peaceful face. "We won't go back to the sanctuary," she said to the child. "Ranek doesn't need me any more and, besides, it's better if I don't have to see him again and watch him being packed on the big cart together with all the others."

She stumbled, she pulled herself up again. The child awakened. It opened its arms and its tiny grey face contorted itself into a smile. Then it fell asleep once more.

Deborah pressed the child more tightly to her bosom as though afraid she might suddenly lose it. "We'll go to the brothel yard," she said to the child. "And there we'll sit down on the cellar

steps. They won't chase us away as they chased him. We're still healthy, the two of us! It won't get very cold tonight and tomorrow morning we'll look for a better place. You don't need to be afraid. We're sure to find something. And I'll get us something to eat." Deborah smiled. "You don't need to be afraid," she repeated. "Mother will watch over you."